



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



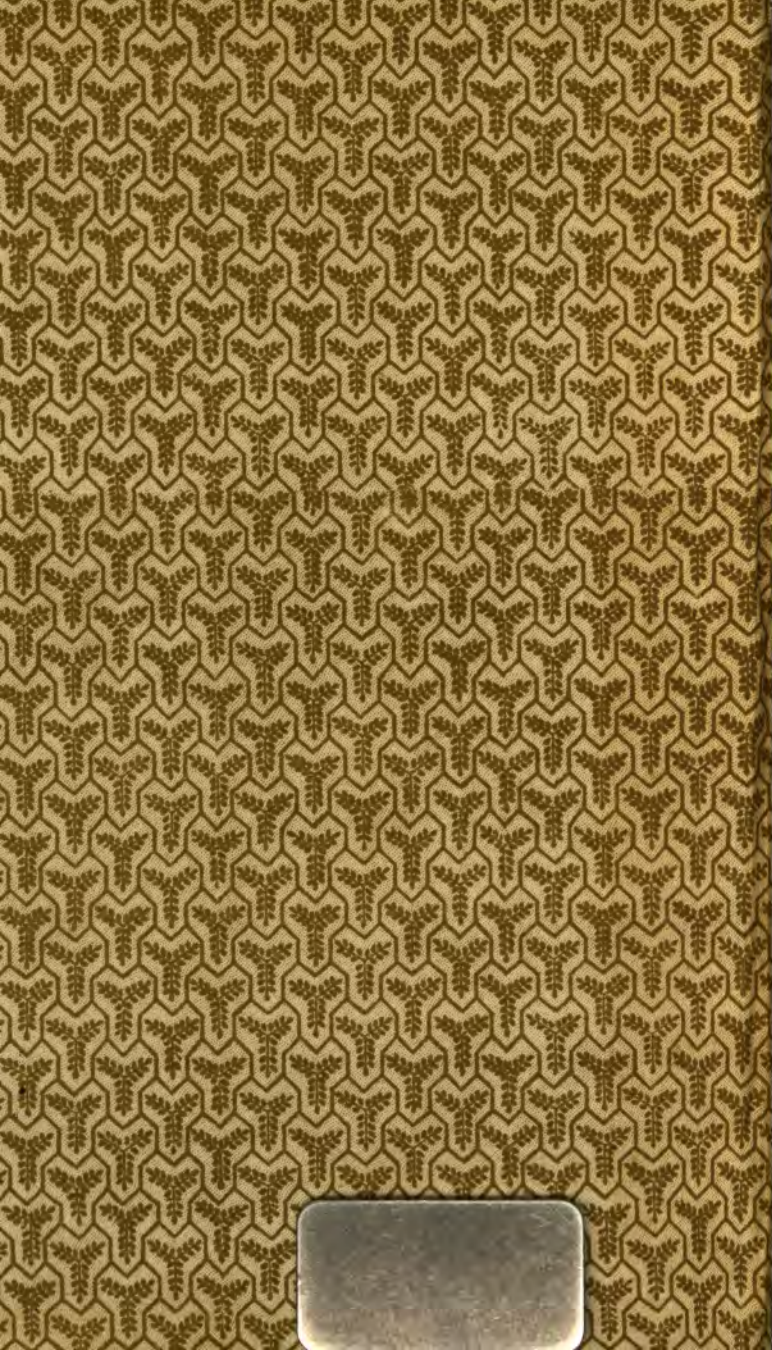
In a

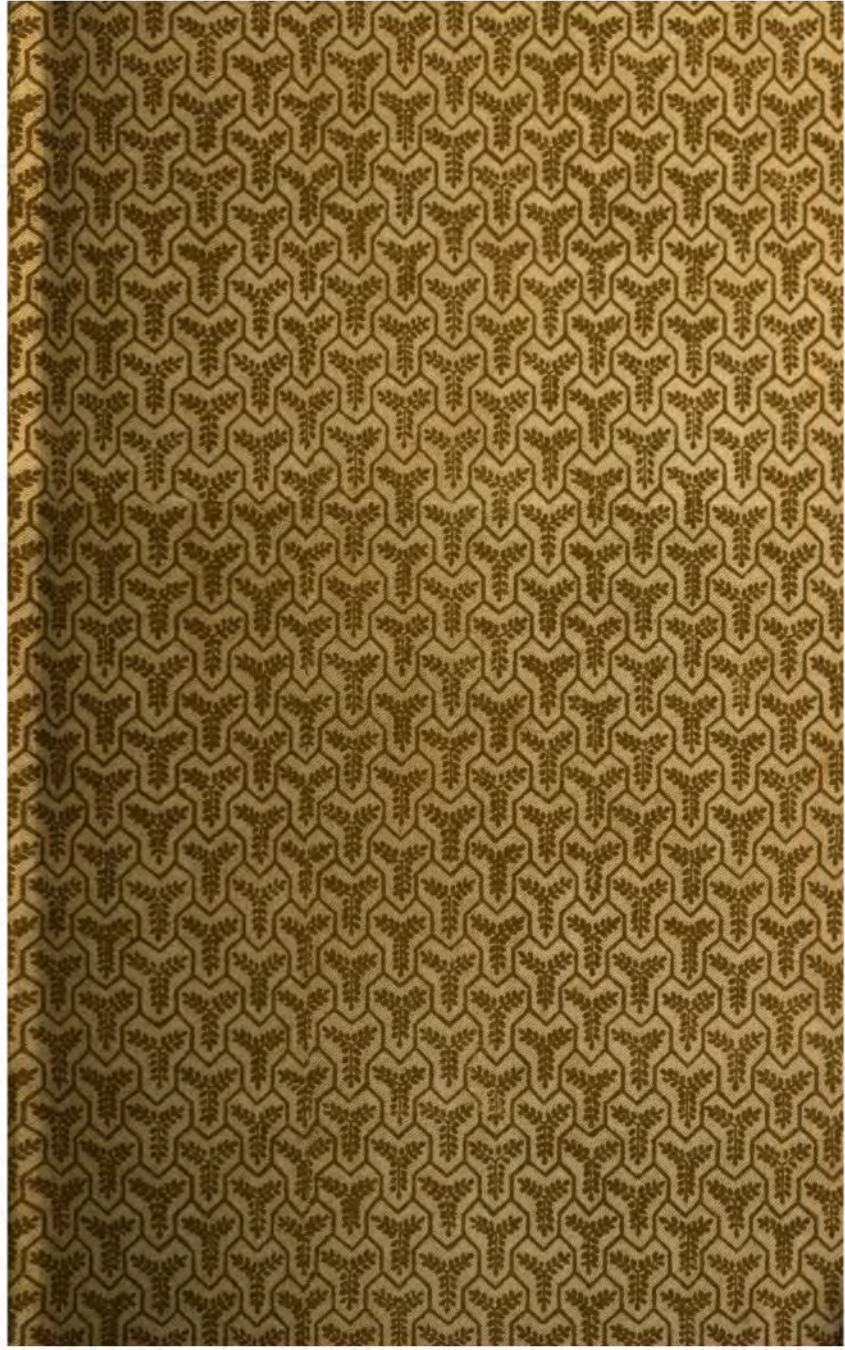
Grass Country

By

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON









IN A GRASS COUNTRY:

A Story of Love and Sport,

BY

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

"DECEIVERS EVER," "JULIET'S GUARDIAN," "VERA NEVILL," "PURE
GOLD," "A NORTH-COUNTRY MAID," "A DEAD PAST,"
"THE LODGE BY THE SEA," ETC., ETC.

"Come, I'll show you a country that none can surpass,
For a flyer to cross like a bird on the wing.
We have acres of woodland and oceans of grass;
We have game in the autumn and cubs in the spring;
We have scores of good fellows hang out in the Shires."
.....
"And life is short, and love is life,
And so the tale is told."

WHITE-MELVILLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & Co., 31, SOUTHAMPTON ST., STRAND, W.C.
1885.

256. e. 1233



PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO., GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, W.C. ;
AND MIDDLE MILL, KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE DEVONSHIRE COAST	3
II.—HIS DESTINY	23
III.—IN THE SHIRES	43
IV.—A HUNTING MORNING	63
V.—CAMBRAY CASTLE	85
VI.—GOOD RESOLUTIONS	109
VII.—DISILLUSION	131
VIII.—DICK GOES TO MISRULE	149
IX.—“LOVE WILL FIND OUT THE WAY”	171
X.—MRS. CLITHEROE	193
XI.—FALSE LOVE AND TRUE	215
XII.—AVICE’S FLIGHT	235
XIII.—TOM AT CAMBRAY CASTLE	255

Chapter the First.

THE DEVONSHIRE COAST.

“ Que diable allait-il faire
Dans cette galère ? ”

“ Fourberies de Scapin,” MOLIÈRE.





IN A GRASS COUNTRY.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEVONSHIRE COAST.

*"Que diable allait-il faire
Dans cette galère ?"*

"Fourberies de Scapin," MOLIÈRE.

A LAZY do-nothing afternoon. A warm haze lay like a golden veil over the earth and sea ; you could not tell where the waters ended nor where the heavens began, so tender were the faint blending lines that mysteriously united them into one ; even the red sandstone cliffs to the right looked shadowy and unreal, and the wide sweep of Crowbay fell away inland in faint undulating curves that melted themselves indescribably into the pale blues and golds of the distant autumn landscape.

Stretched at his ease, full length in the sun-

shine, lay a young man grubbing holes with his hands in the shining yellow sand. The high road that ran for a mile or so close to the shore was but a hundred yards behind him, and along it passed and repassed occasionally the humble inhabitants of Crowbay, brown-faced, bare-legged toilers of the sea, but of their glances, amused and approving for the most part, he took very little heed.

For what did it matter to Dick Gaskell whether the whole of Devonshire saw him lying in so loverlike an attitude at Avice Colston's pretty bare brown feet !

Avice sat on a black, seaweed-covered rock close beside him ; she wore a red cloak and short lilac cotton skirts, she had nothing on her head save a shock of pale hair, which the sun had bleached upon its upper surface into a whitish yellow ; she had very blue eyes, and a complexion that was tanned and reddened into a rich mellow tone ; altogether she resembled those fair-haired, brown-limbed Brittany fish-women which Mr. Hook loves to portray for us.

In Dick Gaskell's eyes, as he lay upon the sands and contemplated her, she was eminently picturesque and charming; the whole scene, with Avice as its central figure, harmonized quite delightfully together; she was thoroughly in keeping with her surroundings. There was the hazy sea, the strips of flat, wet yellow sand, with the reaches of brown rocks that kept cropping up with the outgoing tide; there were the red cliffs behind, and the curves of the bay dotted round with fishermen's cottages; and an old boat battered by the salt water into every shade and tone of green and brown and orange lying turned over on her side hard by; and there was Avice herself, the very impersonification of an ideal fisherwoman, with her bare legs and her red cloak, and her shrimping net on the sands beside her.

Could anything be more perfect? The only inharmonious element in the whole picture, if he had taken it into his consideration, was the figure of Mr. Richard Gaskell himself—for what on earth had a young gentleman in

stand-up collars and an irreproachable suit of tweed dittos to do with a scene like this? which might have been fitly labelled, "A Fisher-girl on the Coast of Devonshire," and hung up straight way upon the walls of the Royal Academy!

There was nothing at all appropriate in his presence here. Dick was merely a good-looking young man of six and twenty, with dark curly hair and steel grey eyes, surrounded with lashes black as jet; he wore an auburn moustache, and had clean-cut, refined-looking features. He was the sort of man whom women look after with admiring eyes in Hyde Park or in Belgravian drawing-rooms, not at all such a one as should be an object of consideration to a bare-legged girl whose father owned a fishing smack, and whose daily occupation was shrimping.

It is possible that something of the incongruity of his position may have occurred to him, for he caught himself thinking :

"What would her ladyship say if she could see me now!" Then he pulled himself together,

with rather a bitter little smile, and took one of Avice's brown hands between his own.

"Darling"—that word *darling* comes so easily to some men's lips!—it is addressed equally to high and low, loved and unloved! "Darling, you haven't said a word for an age—what are you thinking about, I wonder?"

"For the matter of that, neither have you, Mr. Gaskell."

"Mr. Gaskell!" with a lazy reproachfulness in his fine eyes.

"Well, then, Dick, if you like it better!" said the girl with a little laugh. "I was thinking—oh, I can't quite remember—yes, it was what a nice lot of shrimps we'd got for tea to-night, and whether we hadn't better stop and gather some watercresses from uncle Jim's beds as we go back over the fields to eat with them."

Dick shuddered slightly, and dropped the pretty hand he held. She had been looking out to sea with unutterable things in her forget-me-not blue eyes, and all that she had been

thinking about was of shrimps and water-cresses.

“And what were *you* thinking about?” she went on, turning upon him with smiling eyes. He looked up into her face admiringly—she was a very pretty girl, there was no doubt about that. Of course she would be likely to talk about shrimps—she often did, was it not natural that she should do so?—what did it matter! How rich was the colouring of her clear red skin; how delightful the contrast of her yellow gold hair and her turquoise blue eyes! A lovely girl, and so different, too, to——Ah, well, that was all the better; did anybody here down in Crowbay ask him about his prospects or inquire what his income was? they had taken him for what he was, these simple people amongst whom he had been sojourning for the last few months; nobody cared whether he was rich or poor.

“I have been thinking,” he said in answer to Avice’s question, “that I shall have to go away soon, darling——”

"To go away!" she repeated in dismay, the corners of her rosy mouth drooping, and her eyes opening wide; "so soon as this! Oh, you can't mean it!"

"*Soon, Avice!* Why, do you know how long I have been here? four months to-day——"

"It seems like four days!" she murmured sighing. All this was nice and flattering. She turned her head away so that he could not see her face—she was very sorry then! Well, it is something to be loved even by a fisherman's daughter; it is soothing, too, when one has always in the background of one's mind a vision of a pale, frightened face that could not have cared, and the memory of slow, chilling words that struck like hard, knife thrusts into the heart.

Avice would care if he went away—Avice would be sorry, her blue eyes would no doubt weep for him—there are times in a man's life when even the love of a fishergirl may become of infinite value to him—times when he is sore and wounded and angry, impatient with a pain which he cannot stifle,

and eager to forget memories which will not become forgotten.

Of course, all this is no real excuse—because a man in Mr. Gaskell's position of life has no business to disport himself by making love to a fisher maiden whom he has not the remotest intention of marrying; at the same time, there is no doubt that nineteen men out of twenty would have done the same thing under the same circumstances, and when he proceeded to take Avicé's unresisting little figure into his arms, and to kiss away the tears from her eyes and the sad pout from her rosy lips, there is no doubt that he most thoroughly enjoyed the occupation.

“Oh, Dick—oh, please—please,” in an agonized whisper, “here comes father, close behind us!”

He let her go fast enough then, starting away from her guiltily; this was an annoyance he had not certainly counted upon.

Behind them, across the soft yielding sands, so that his approaching footsteps had not

been heard until he was close at hand, came striding a short, thick-set, brawny-looking man in a rough jersey suit. He had grey hair and keen blue eyes, which peered out eagerly from the grizzled penthouse of his rough eyebrows. He might have been about sixty, and in spite of the roughness of his dress and appearance, there was a certain superiority in his aspect which marked him out as a man who knows himself to be prosperous and well-to-do, and who respects himself accordingly. Stephen Colston, in fact, was reckoned a man of means amongst his fellows. In his youth he had been as one of themselves, just a fisherman like all the others, but a lucky venture on the coast of Holland had turned the scale of fortune for him; other successful speculations had followed—he came to have a belief in himself and in the superior leadings of his destiny—he bought two boats of his own, and they prospered in their voyages; other people underwent failure and destruction, Stephen never; his boats always came home safely, storms never

wrecked them, nor did ill-luck and bad seasons seem to affect them. And so little by little did he amass wealth, or what seemed to be wealth to the Joes and Bills of Crowbay, who had remembered him as a lad. And then, in his old age, having sold his old boats for more than he had given for them, he came back to settle upon his native coast, and took up his abode in Crowbay. They were all poor, hard-working men along that thinly-populated coast line of Crowbay, rising early and toiling late; men who "went down to the sea in ships" at all seasons and in all weathers, whose wives mended their nets and cooked their frugal dinners, and whose children tumbled about, brown and healthy, but unkempt and untaught, upon the paternal doorsteps. They were simple, drudging souls for the most part, who were born and married and buried, such as were not drowned at sea, all under the shadow of their own ugly little church tower, and who ate the bread of carefulness from the day of their birth to the day of their death. When Stephen Colston came

amongst them, and took the big white cottage near the Post Office that stood between its strip of flower garden in front and its half-acre of kitchen garden and orchard behind, when he put up lace curtains in the windows of his daughter's parlour, and engaged a servant girl to wait upon her just as if she were a "real lady," then the admiration and respect of all these humble people knew no bounds. They regarded him as a very great man indeed.

By-and-by Stephen bought a brand new fishing smack of his own, with a white sail, and christened her the "Avice," after his daughter. He also engaged a man by the week to look after his new purchase, to go with him when he felt disposed to dabble at his old trade again, or to take his daughter out for a sail, for all the world, they said, as though it had been a gentleman's own yacht; this naturally put the finishing touch of glory, as it were, to his grandeur and importance. From thenceforth the father and daughter became "Mr. and Miss Colston" to the

dwellers of Crowbay, and were looked upon with a deep veneration, not, however, entirely unmingled with envy.

As to Avice, she took to the sea like a duckling to a duck pond—to ply her shrimping net along the shallow waters, just like the other women who worked for their living, was her daily delight; to be out in the boat in all weathers, to work the sail, to guide the helm, or to help to haul in the great brown fishing nets over the smack's side were her accomplishments. She desired nothing better, thought of no better life, wished for no higher fate than to be a fisherman's wife. But Stephen had his aspirations. To make his daughter "a lady" lay like a golden dream for ever in his weather-beaten old head, to see her dressed up in fine clothes, with gloves on her hands and a lace parasol over her head, like those dainty creatures he had sometimes watched walking about on the piers at Folkestone or Boulogne, that was how he would have liked to have seen his Avice.

He had wild projects sometimes of taking

her to Margate or to Dover—or even to London, of dressing her up smartly and giving her “her chance,” as he put it to himself—but then he was rather doubtful of his own capacity for introducing a woman-child into a higher society than she was born to ; his own friends were all rough men who consorted in the low public-houses of sea-side towns ; he did not think that any one of these could give her a lift up in the world, and he was totally ignorant as to how such a thing could be brought about.

Then all at once a wonderful thing happened. There dropped down one summer day, from the skies as it were, an individual who seemed to Stephen Colston’s excited imagination to be an actual instrument from heaven for the accomplishment of his fondest daydreams. Mr. Richard Gaskell appeared at Crowbay one afternoon, being deposited at the door of the “Green Man” by the Exeter coach, with the ostensible object of enjoying sea-fishing as practised upon the Devonshire coast. That he came in reality with a view

to entire tranquillity and seclusion—and because things had become too hot for him to endure any longer in his accustomed haunts in and about Pall Mall—was neither here nor there, nor did it strike upon the mind of our worthy friend, Stephen, that for a fashionable young man about town to be seized with an inordinate desire to capture a few bass or whittings in the middle of July off the coast of Crowbay, was an idiosyncrasy which was, to say the least of it, somewhat singular, and which might possibly demand investigation. As a matter of fact, the fashionable man about town was an unknown animal to our good friend Stephen; he knew no more concerning his habits and customs than if he had been an antediluvian monster. But he did know a gentleman when he saw him, having come across one or two specimens during his wanderings, and when he beheld Mr. Gaskell for the first time, he was quite right in jumping at once to the conclusion that here was a true and genuine sample of the species.

“None o’ your shoddy here!” said Stephen

to himself as he eyed the young man's tall, athletic figure and handsome face critically. "A reel fust-class sort this 'un is—good old fam'ly I'll be bound!" and he was quite right in his intuition.

Dick Gaskell stayed for two nights at the "Green Man," which he found exceedingly dirty and uncomfortable, after which he accepted Mr. Colston's invitation to migrate to Seaview Villa with an alacrity born of his exceeding disgust at the discomforts of the village pothouse, and of unfeigned delight at the proffered hospitality of pretty Avice Colston's father.

He removed himself and his goods and chattels to the best bedroom of the white cottage, a sunny room overlooking the bay with clean dimity curtains to the bed, and quite an elegant dressing-table draped in pink calico and crochet-work petticoats, upon which he proceeded to set forth a multitude of wonderful things in the way of silver-topped cut-glass bottles and ivory implements of toilet which filled the soul of Avice with

unspeakable awe and admiration, and concerning the uses of most of which she had not the remotest conception.

Here Dick Gaskell took up his abode for a week or ten days, and here he remained four months. It was the 12th of June when he came, it is the 12th of October now.

He had mingled his amusements cleverly and thoroughly enjoyably; they had been twofold, and had been pursued with a beautiful steadiness of alternated regularity. He had fished and he had made love to Avice.

During the first part of the time the fishing had been in the ascendant, and the love-making had come in at odd times as a secondary consideration; but as the weeks wore away the relative proportions of the two gradually changed places. Instead of fishing all day and making love at odd moments, he reversed the order; he made love all day and fished whenever there was nothing better to do.

And all this time Stephen Colston stood by and pretended to see nothing. He was biding his time.

Things were going well, he wasn't going to speak and spoil all for the sake of being in too great a hurry. He wasn't afraid of his luck deserting him now, in the supremest venture of his whole life—why should it? He had always been fortunate, everything had always turned out right for him, he had a sublime faith in himself and in the success which had invariably attended him through life.

He felt absolutely convinced that he was destined to see his daughter "a lady" before he died.

After that, said Colston to himself, after that he would be content to die, for he was fond of his daughter in his way, although, perhaps, his personal pride in her was larger than his love; his thoughts, indeed, flew on with a marvellous rapidity to that monolith in grey granite which should be one day erected over his mortal remains, and before which another generation of Crowbaysians should stand transfixed; reading over the golden letters whereby it would be recorded

that this monument had been erected "In memory of Mr. Colston, of Seaview Villa, by his daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Gaskell." Yes, that was a very gratifying flight of fancy, if he only could be there himself in the spirit to see the people read it, and to note the admiration with which his earthly career would be remembered by his survivors. And then Stephen pulled himself up suddenly in the midst of these delightful visions to consider a more practically suggestive scene which suddenly met his view as he rounded the corner of the road.

For there sat Dick and Avice down by the shore upon the sands. Their backs were turned towards him, but from the peculiar disposition of their arms and heads, and from the remarkable insensibility which they evinced to the remainder of creation and to his own close proximity, there could be no sort or shadow of doubt in the mind of any unprejudiced observer as to what was the nature of their occupation.

Chapter the Second.

HIS DESTINY.

“ When Fortune means to men most good
She looks upon them with a threatening eye.”

“ King John,” SHAKESPEARE.





CHAPTER II.

HIS DESTINY.

"When Fortune means to men most good
She looks upon them with a threatening eye."

"King John," SHAKESPEARE.

"So you and my little girl have made it up together, Mr. Gaskell?"

They were walking slowly upwards across the rough hummocks of sand that divided the beach from the road. On in front Avise, with her shrimping-net over her shoulder and her bare brown legs gleaming in the sun, was speeding rapidly away towards those water-cress beds belonging to her uncle Jim, after which she had already expressed covetous desires. Dick looked after her swiftly-vanishing little figure with mingled sensations of annoyance and disgust. All at once the

familiar landscape seemed to become ugly and unattractive to him, the wide bay, the red cliffs, the round-topped moorland hills—how dull and prosaic it all looked! What on earth had made him stay here for four months! what could he have seen in it all this time!

And then because he made no answer, old Colston looked at him sharply and keenly from beneath his bent brows, with eyes that were blue like his daughter's, but had none of the tender softness of hers.

"Of course, sir, you mean all fair and square by my little girl?" and this time there was a sharp ring of asperity in the question.

"Of course, what should make you think otherwise," answered Dick hurriedly; he had to make some sort of answer, but he spoke quickly, shufflingly even, and without heartiness, neither did his eyes meet those of his questioner.

And down went his heart to his toes. Did it mean then that he was to be made to marry Avice Colston?—was that what all this idle summer philandering was to end in? A mar-

riage with an old fisherman's daughter ! And yet how could he put it in so many words to that fisherman that he had had no such intention ! Poor pretty Avice, it had been so pleasant to lie at her feet in the sunshine, to skim across the summer sea by her side, to call up smiles in her forget-me-not eyes, and to kiss the little petulant pouting lips that were so ready to be kissed, that was all nice enough—but marriage—that prosaic end of love-making that even under favourable circumstances is apt to make a man shudder as he contemplates the plunge into an unknown futurity—marriage with Avice Colston ? perish the thought !

“ Well, well, of course you mean rightly by her, and no offence, I hope, that I just mentioned it, sir, for I knows a gentleman when I sees him, and I knowed well enough when I first clapped eyes on you that you was a right sort. There be some, sir, that'll just come and take a poor girl's heart, aye, and her good name, too, for the matter o' that, and then ride away, so to speak, one fine morning and forget

all about her; but you ain't one of that kind, Mr. Gaskell."

It was a confused murmuring in his ears, a sort of jumble of words which he heard without hearing, and listened to without understanding, all but the last sentence, and that somehow did arrest his attention, "to ride away one fine morning and forget all about her"—yes, that was what he had better do, that no doubt was his only hope of escape; then to the next words, too, he did listen with a quickened sense of dismay and terror. "We won't have no delays about the wedding, sir; happy's the wooing that's not long a doing, they say, so if you come to marry——"

"Mr. Colston, I am not in a position to marry," interrupted Dick very quickly; "I am a poor man; I cannot afford to keep a wife, and what is more, I am over head and ears in debt."

"Ah, ah!" laughed the old man softly, "there'll be no trouble about that, Mr. Gaskell, I ain't lived all these years, and worked hard for nothing, I can tell you. Stephen

Colston's daughter ain't a pauper; she won't go empty-handed to her husband I promise you! A tidy bit of money, all in the bank at Exeter, sir, enough to set up a young couple handsome, and a bit over for the babies, too; and as to debts, Mr. Gaskell, don't you trouble your head over them; young men will be young men, as I well know, and if it come to a hundred pounds to set you straight, I ain't one to let that stand in the way of my girl's happiness."

A hundred pounds! Heaven and earth, what was the good of a hundred pounds to Dick Gaskell? Would it pay even his tailor's bill; and there were the jeweller and the hosier, the cigar merchant and the wine merchant, and heaven knows how many others all clamouring for their money. A hundred pounds! Dick could almost have laughed aloud at the sheer irony of the suggestion.

"And then it ain't as if you'd need to be setting up house at first. There's lots of room for you both at Seaview Villa. You'd have the best bedroom and the parlour all to your-

selves, you and Avice ; I only want my little cabin. I should keep right out of your way, you may be sure of that, sir ; you won't mind the old man if he stops in his bunk and only just comes out at meal times, and you'd have all the rest of the house to yourselves, you and your wife. Oh, it wouldn't cost you much, and my girl ain't like a lady born—she don't want no extravagances—you can spend your own money, sir, on frocks and fallals for her—and a bit of a trip up to London now and again. I'll find the beef and mutton for you both."

They were close to the house now—the house in which Stephen was drawing such an eloquent picture of Dick's future life, he looked up at it almost with a shudder. There were the white washed walls and the stucco pillared porch which the old man regarded as so splendid an emblem of gentility—and the windows of the parlour, closely shut, of course, with netted white curtains draping themselves behind the window panes, and pots of scarlet geraniums in full flower in front of them—and

further on at the open kitchen window Avice was washing her watercresses in a wooden bowl, looking up to smile at her father and her lover as they came up the garden walk together.

Only this morning Dick would have thought it a pretty picture, Avice with her yellow head framed in by the open casement round which a dark-leaved myrtle tree had clambered, half pruned and ragged, and covered with sprays of late star-like blossoms—and the shrimping-net leaning up against the house outside—and a bright brass water jug on the window-sill by her side, with all the dark warm kitchen behind her, and long rows of blue and white dishes upon the dresser.

Dick, who was always on the look-out for picturesque effects, having at one time dabbled with the arts himself, would have christened it "Dutch Interior—Woman Washing Vegetables," after Van Hoop, and would have raved over it accordingly.

But at this moment there was nothing picturesque at all about it in his eyes, nor

anything lovely about Avice as the central figure of the picture. It was only just a slice out of his own future life at Seaview Villa, his wife in the kitchen, her hands rather red, her cotton dress not quite spotlessly fresh—a certain unlovely prosaicness about the homely background, and himself coming home to six o'clock tea on shrimps and watercresses with his father-in-law!

Good heavens! That was how it would be day after day! This would be his daily life; no longer a summer idyl to be prolonged or shortened at his own will, but a law of necessity, a thralldom from which there should be no escape.

Dick felt as if he should choke.

How was he going to get away from it? how escape from this dreadful dilemma into which his own folly had brought him?

And then, as they stood under the porch upon the door step, the old man said to him, with a playful chuckle and a jerk of his thumb over his right shoulder:

“No occasion to go very far you see, sir;

it's all handy and convenient in Crowbay. Church quite near—we needn't order a coach and four to get there!"

Yes, it was near enough, the ugly little squat building with its battered tower and its ill-kept untidy churchyard, where the village children and the village dogs were playing hide-and-seek together amongst the graves—near enough in all conscience; the very sight of it seemed to him like an evil vision out of the dreadful destiny that was hanging over him.

And yet such is the variableness and the inconsistency of man, that it came to pass late that same evening, after Dick had discussed his pipe and his glass of grog with the old man—and when the tea things had been all cleared away, and Avice no longer bare-legged and short-skirted, but dressed decorously in her best Sunday gown, sat under the lamplight darning her father's socks, that Mr. Richard Gaskell found himself somehow sitting very close beside her, and that when the old man dozed off, or, perhaps, only pretended to doze in his leathern armchair, Dick's arm stole

by force of habit round Avice's waist, and his lips found themselves close against the warm softness of her round brown throat.

How was a man to help it? he said to himself, with a sort of shame, too, at his own utter weakness. He had got so used to kissing her; she was so soft and pretty, and she liked being kissed so much; was it in nature that he should leave it off all at once? He did not desire to make her his wife, but surely he was bound to go on with the love-making, till—well, till he should “get up and ride away,” as Stephen Colston put it.

“So father says you are going to marry me,” whispers Avice suddenly into his ear, in answer to some cooing little murmur of flattery which his lips have just breathed with a little running accompaniment of quick kisses upon her red-brown cheek.

It was like a moral shower-bath. He drew back ever so little from her, and the rain of kisses suddenly ceased.

“Oh, marriage!” he repeated half irritably;

“why should we look forward; aren’t we very happy as we are?”

A shade came into Avice’s blue eyes; she was not her father’s child for nothing.

“I don’t think you ought to say that to me, sir. Of course I have always expected you to marry me after telling me so often how much you love me, and kissing me, and everything.”

Dick stretched up his arms behind his head, and leant back in his chair contemplating the ceiling thoughtfully, puffing hard at his pipe the while.

“My dear little girl, one can’t do everything in a hurry,” he said presently. “Of course I shall marry you some day.”

And then he was silent again, wondering how he should get out of it, and what he could do to go away without exciting suspicion concerning his ulterior purposes. That was the mischief of it, he thought, as he glanced at the strong brawny frame of his would-be father-in-law stretched out in healthy, if inelegant, repose in the horse-hair armchair opposite.

Somehow Mr. Gaskell did not relish the idea of exciting the rage and vengeance of that sinewy-limbed ancient mariner. The retaliation of such a man is apt to be a trifle lawless, and yet perfectly to the point, and is generally marked by a want of gentlemanlike consideration for the feelings of its object, which is eminently distressing and unpleasant. Dick had no desire to subject himself to Stephen Colston's condign revenge. As to Avice, she was probably of her father's opinion, that it was wise to let well alone, for, having extracted the above lazily-given promise, she resumed her work with a tranquil air of absolute satisfaction.

Late that night Dick leant out of his little bedroom window above—that “best bedroom,” of which the father and daughter boasted with such simple pride—and resting his chin against his hands, looked out with moody eyes into the dim obscurity of the night, and then and there he thought the whole matter out calmly and dispassionately. There was an owl's light from the star-flecked heavens,

and the pale glimmer of a moon that had set already. Dick could hear the swish, swish of the waves upon the sand, and he could see the long thin line of quivering foam that gleamed whitely away round the head of the bay. There was nothing else to be distinguished, only the faint glimmer of a light or two far away in some cottage window, and the black shadow of that dreadful little church hard by, with regard to which old Colston had made so suggestive an allusion, and which loomed grimly and blackly close by amongst the shadows of the night.

A man might do worse, perhaps, said Mr. Gaskell to himself doubtfully, than stop all his life long in this quiet little corner of the world with a pretty little wife who would worship him, and a father-in-law who was only anxious to be allowed the privilege of paying his weekly bills! A man *bien entendu* to whom the alternative presented itself in the unattractive shape of utter ruin, inability to show his face in town, necessity of concealment in his own country, or of an incontinent flight from

his native land. And then, when, added to all this, Dick came to recollect that he had been sent about his business with contumely, that he had been hunted with scorn—with fury even—out of the presence of the one woman whom he had ever really wished to marry, when his poverty had been counted to him as an offence, and his debts as an absolute crime in connection with his love—why, was it not surely an utter folly that he should want to throw away this one chance of bare existence and peaceful security, which had somehow, late in time, dropped, as it were, into his very mouth?

“As long as George was unmarried even,” argued Mr. Gaskell, setting forth all the pros and cons to himself with careful impartiality, “as long as I was at least his heir presumptive—why even then the look-out was bad enough, seeing that he is younger than I am, and has lived the life of an anchorite. My chances were small even then. George, who never smokes or drinks, who goes to bed at eleven o’clock every night of his life,

who is too careful of his precious self to run any chance of accidents; who lives in the best hunting county in England and never gets astride a horse; has himself driven about in his mother's family chariot for fear of being upset, and wouldn't let off a gun if he knew how lest it should blow up in his hands—paugh! It makes me sick to think of such a muff as George having Hollowcroft and all that money! And he's so healthy, too. A fellow like that can't die; there's nothing to kill him. I don't believe he ever had so much as a toothache in his life. Still, I suppose there was just an off chance in my favour, but now, of course, it's hopeless. By Jove! it's this very week he is to be married! Somebody is sure to send me a paper—somebody always does when there's anything likely to be particularly disagreeable to one's feelings in it. I shall get it in a day or two, no doubt; it will dribble down, *via* Club Chambers, the Hotel at Exeter, and so forth. It is wonderful how cleverly bills and writs and unpleasant communications

of all sorts have a knack of finding one out, however dark one keeps one's whereabouts—ah, well," stretching himself wearily as he left his open window, and went back listlessly into the prim little bedroom behind him, with its chill dimity curtains, and its cleanly-scoured boarded floor with the one strip of carpet down the middle—"ah, it's all one to you now, Dick, my friend, you've had a merry time and a short one, and life is up for you. Friendship, happiness, love! are they not all dead letters to the man who is stone-broke as I am? As to George—poor chap, he can't help being a muff, any more than his father could help being older than mine—it's rather unhandsome of him, certainly, to marry so young, and to cut off my last chance—but there, it don't signify much. I suppose, in the long run, it was bound to happen sooner or later, and I for one wish him luck—and a large family!"

And Dick yawned prodigiously, and, with a philosophical resignation to circumstances over which he had no control, he proceeded

to get himself into bed, where even the stern necessity which seemed to be forcing him into a marriage with Avice Colston was soon forgotten in the delightful mazes of a blissful and dreamless slumber.

Would he have slept so peacefully, I wonder, had he known that only that very morning in the *Times* newspaper there had appeared the following announcement :

“ On the 10th inst., very suddenly, of acute inflammation of the lungs, brought on by a chill caught when bathing—George Hollowcroft Gaskell, Esq., of Hollowcroft Hall, Meadowshire, aged 24.”





Chapter the Third.

IN THE SHIRES.

“There is but one cure for all maladies sure
That reacheth the heart to its core,
'Tis the sound of the horn on a fine hunting morn,
And where is the heart wishing more?”





CHAPTER III.

IN THE SHIRES.

"There is but one cure for all maladies sure
That reacheth the heart to its core,
'Tis the sound of the horn on a fine hunting morn,
And where is the heart wishing more?"

"EVE, EVE! where are you?"

"Little wretch, what has become of you?"

"Eve, you promised to come and tie my scarf; are you ever coming?"

Three heads were stuck almost simultaneously out of three different windows, and three voices rang out harshly into the morning air.

Eve took not the smallest notice of them.

She was underneath in the empty coach-house; they might shout themselves hoarse if they liked, she was quite used to them.

"They'll just have to wait till I've finished,"

she muttered, and concentrated her attention more fixedly than ever upon Balzac's nose.

Eve sat on an overturned hamper, Balzac sat facing her on an empty champagne case, his front paws rested upon her knees, in his upturned eyes there was a piteous expression of resignation and suffering patience, his body quivered slightly, possibly with apprehensions that were unworthy of his better nature, but his tail made amends for his failing courage by an occasional wag of self-reassurance. Eve held his long black nose firmly in one hand, whilst with the scissors in the other she carved away at his moustache.

Wide open stood the double coach-house doors, the pale morning sunshine lay warmly upon the red-bricked floor, and three fox terrier pups, with cocked ears and sharp little black eyes, assisted gleefully at what they no doubt looked upon as the execution of capital punishment upon their enemy, and made delighted snaps at the little tufts of black hair that fell from Eve's scissors.

Eve herself sat in the shadow, and not a

gleam of the November sun fell upon her chestnut head or lit up her serious chestnut eyes, the dark folds of her habit clung closely about her, and her white hands, severely framed in by the straight cuffs at her wrists, worked swiftly and deftly at her task.

There was a fresh outburst from above, renewed shouts for help, accompanied with strange, prolonged howls of "Tally ho—Yoiks," and other cabalistic cries of doubtful import, which seemed, however, to cause an immense amount of unfeigned delight in some unseen region overhead from whence apparently they proceeded.

"Just catch these, and give them to Greyson then, like a good fellow," said somebody, and clatter, clatter, down came two shining spurs, dropped from above, upon the brick pavement at the very threshold of the coach-house door.

This was too much for Balzac; he started violently, half wrenched his nose out of Eve's hand, and the point of the scissors ran straight into his nose. One wild canine howl, delighted

and fiend-like prancings on the part of the puppies, and out rushed Eve, furious ; a very Nemesis of rage blazing in her upturned face.

“Little Tom, that was too bad of you ! I have run the scissors into his nose !”

Three down-turned faces, so like her own, all convulsed with laughter, and three heads, chestnut-haired like hers, rough and dishevelled, each looking out of his bedroom window—this represented Eve’s family.

There was Gerald and Charlie and Tom, graceless, good-for-nothing boys, aged twenty-five, twenty-two, and nineteen respectively, and Eve herself but a year older than the youngest of them—that was the Latimer family.

They all had red hair, but whilst Eve’s head was like the dream of a poet, the boys’ ruddy pates were only quaint and unlovely. Why is it that what is so beautiful in a woman is so much the reverse in a man ?

People raved over Eve Latimer’s gold-red hair ; nobody ever thought of raving over Gerald or Charlie or Tom ; they are freckled, too, and green-eyed, with big laughing mouths

that never can be brought to close themselves decorously and seriously ; no, not even in church, a place, however, I am bound to confess, where the Latimer boys were not often to be met with.

They are laughing now, madly, immoderately ; the spectacle of Balzac, semi-shaved, tearing round and round the courtyard shaking his bleeding nose, with dismal yaps of grief and rage, pursued by the three white pups who nibbled at his hind legs with the unseemly delight of small natures that have got their enemy at a disadvantage, is not likely to tranquilize the mirth of those three irreverent young gentlemen. Loud guffaws of laughter peal forth into the morning air, Greyson, the head groom, followed by his two stable assistants, appears at the end of the yard to see what is up, and join timidly in the general hilarity.

Eve stamps her foot.

“You wretches, you brutes!” she cries ; “why can’t you leave off laughing and get yourselves dressed ! What is the use of my

having taken a guinea lesson in poodle-shaving, if the very first time I try to do it you make me run the scissors into him by your folly. I was getting on so well, too, and it is so dreadfully difficult—here Balzac, Bal—poor old boy, come here.”

But the black poodle is not such a fool; not willingly is he going back to the torture-rack which has ended in so dire a catastrophe. Tucking his black tail between his legs, he trots off kitchen-wards to seek consolation—where consolation to the canine soul is alone to be found.

“We shall be dead late, if you don’t make haste,” cries Eve; “do be good boys, and I’ll come up and help you. If you go on like this, I swear I’ll go off without you.”

This threat produces the desired effect; the three heads are promptly pulled back, each into its respective window, and the laughter dies away into inarticulate chucklings. Greyson touches his forelock as he picks up the dirty spurs from the brick floor at his young lady’s feet, the puppies go off after him,

tumbling over and over each other in their wild efforts to bite his departing heels, and Eve is left alone.

She sighs a little bit, and then walks out across the courtyard, and looks up thoughtfully at the weathercock on the roof of the house.

Of all the queer houses in all South Meadowshire, surely this that Eve Latimer is looking up at is the queerest.

A long one-storied red-brick house, with many small square-paned windows in a row above, and nothing beneath them but great blank, brown-painted doors mysteriously closed. Above you can be seen the frilled curtains and blue ribbons in Eve's drawing-room and china flowerpots with plants in them. A bird-cage with a parrot in one window, another with a couple of canaries in the next, then bedroom windows with close muslin blinds all in a row. But below, there is nothing whatever to denote a human habitation, not apparently even a front door; nothing but those big blank doors out of which grooms and stablemen issue myste-

riously, for the house is nothing more nor less than a stable, over which some fantastic builder has erected a long row of small dwelling-rooms.

It suited the young Latimers to perfection.

A year ago, when they had come down and taken it, South Meadowshire had marvelled at their courage, but by degrees everybody got used to them and to their strange habitation, and they were accepted by the neighbourhood with all their oddness and all their peculiarities.

The three brothers and their sister lived together by a sort of arrangement of mutual convenience.

They had each of them a small fortune and one very extravagant taste. When their parents died, with one consent the three boys left off being educated and trying to get into professions for which they had no inclination, and determined to club together in order to indulge in that one pursuit which they all had in common ; and what was there for Eve but to join them, too !

All told, they had each of them seven hundred a year; not enough, as Tom said, to keep one donkey decently were they to live apart, but, clubbed together, the four small fortunes made up quite a respectable income. So one October day, last year, Gerald Latimer, trying to look very manlike and serious, and Eve, looking serious in sober earnest, came down from town with an order to view Miswall Lodge, and after going carefully over all the stalls and loose boxes, and inspecting at great length the stable fittings, the hay-loft and the harness-room, giving a careful eye to the stable-yard pump, and to the paddock, where they might exercise their animals, they departed in a great hurry to catch their train, having completely forgotten to go over the dwelling portion of the house. However, they took the agent's word for it, that there were bedrooms enough to hold them; the lease was duly sealed and signed, and in a month's time the young Latimers were in possession of their new abode.

And I am bound to say, with shame and

with sorrow, that such were the conditions of this noisy, happy-go-lucky young family, that very speedily the old name of their habitation became absolutely forgotten, and nobody (save the postman) ever spoke of it again but as "Misrule."

The young people owned ten hunters between them, one of which was occasionally put in the dogcart, besides a smart pony, who trotted to the station when required in a village cart, and there were also attached to the establishment, in one way or another, seventeen dogs, puppies, and cats; and over all this live-stock, including the three brothers, did Eve Latimer rule supreme.

Eve was the only person, indeed, upon whom the cares of life pressed in any fashion; she was as devoted to hunting as her brothers, but, unlike them, she sometimes had her doubts as to whether the pursuit of the fox was after all the only end and object of existence.

They were dear, good boys, of course, with their freckled faces and their honest green

eyes, and their jolly, hearty laughter ; but was it quite right that Gerald should have thrown up his clerkship in the Board of Trade the very instant that their father died, that Charlie should have removed himself from Cambridge, and Tom have stoutly declined to convey himself back to the private tutor who was coaching him for the army? Was it a terrible mistake, Eve sometimes wondered, that she had been a consenting party to all this?

How well she remembered the little conclave in the dark back room of the dingy London house on the day after their father's funeral, when it had been clearly brought home to the understanding, even of Tom, that the money was their very own, divided exactly between the four of them, with neither let nor hindrance in the shape of trustee or guardian to stand betwixt themselves and their inheritance.

It was a curious will that poor Mr. Latimer had made, drawn up by himself, with neither lawyer nor lawyer's clerk to assist in its

formation—curious from its very simplicity—trustees, he had always said, had been the bane of his own early life; he would never hamper his children or tie up their hands by senseless formalities; but then, perhaps, poor gentleman, he had not intended to depart this life quite so soon as he did, nor can it be believed that he seriously contemplated the fact that his four children, the eldest of whom was then only twenty-four, should be suddenly invested with the absolute capacity of making ducks and drakes of his life's earnings.

This was, however, what it amounted to, and what they might have done, but fortunately for the boys they had Eve, and with Eve at the head of affairs, things surely could not go very far wrong.

Eve had sat at the top of the table in her deep mourning on that solemn occasion when Mr. Latimer's children had settled their life's destiny, looking very sad and sweet, with her bright gold hair shining like a light in the gloom of the back study—and Gerald sat opposite to her, Charlie and Tom on either side.

"I for one," said Gerald, tapping a paper-knife upon the table, "vote that we all club together and go and live in a hunting county."

"So do I," cried Charlie.

"And I," echoed little Tom.

"But," objected Eve, "there's your appointment, Gerald——"

"I am going to give it up ; in fact, I've got my resignation all written, ready to send in."

"Oh——" gasped Eve a little flabbergasted.

"I don't mean to return to college," here remarked Charlie ; "why should I spend my own money in doing what I dislike?"

"And you may take your oath old Noggs ain't going to see a blessed sovereign more of *mine*," said Tom with energy, Noggs being the respectable "cramming" tutor under whose care his defunct father had placed him.

"But, boys, dear!" cried Eve rather desperately, "do think of your future prospects ; is it right to throw all that away?"

"Bother future prospects," said Gerald ; "there is only one thing worth living for."

"Only one!" cried the other two in a breath.

"Look here," continued Gerald, "it just comes to this; that here are the three of us all mugging away at doing a lot of things we hate; of course we were bound to do it as long as the poor governor was alive, but now the dear old chap is gone," with a bit of a gulp, "why what do you suppose he has left us his money for but to do what we like and be happy? It isn't as if we were unsteady or vicious—we don't bet or gamble or drink; we don't want to dissipate our money, we only want to spend it in a way that will make us happy. What we want to do is to hunt, and, by Jove, that's what we *will* do—and do it well, too, if we are all of one mind!"

"Hear, hear!" cried the younger boys, thumping on the table in vigorous applause. "Well," said Gerald, "and of course Eve, you'll join, too; the more of us together the better we shall be able to turn ourselves out. Oh, of course, Eve, you must come; what could we do without you; why you must keep house for us,

and help us to settle, and make a nice pretty home for us, and you know you love a horse as much as any of us, and go a deuced sight better than all of us, too!"

Here they all got up and kissed her, and there was a chorus of excited exclamations.

"Dear old Eve!"

"The best fellow in the world is our Eve."

"Oh, Eve, of course you'll come, too!" and that was how Eve's poor little conscientious objections came to be overridden, and she, too, gave in her adhesion to the new departure of their lives.

"Only, mind one thing," said Gerald severely, looking round the table, but resting his eyes, when they came to her, upon Eve, with an extra gleam of gravity in them; "there is one thing that we must all promise each other, faithfully and solemnly, for the good of the others—we must never marry—not one of us, ever!"

"I swear I never will!" cried little Tom heartily, from the very bottom of his heart; "never, never! Marrying is all rot."

"Neither will I," said Charlie; "there's only one woman in the world worth speaking to, and that is Eve, all the others are mere trash;" this was said quite with an air of a profound connoisseur of the sex.

"Neither, of course, shall I," repeated Gerald, drawing up his collar with a dignity befitting his twenty-four summers; "in fact, I've—been in love once—and found it a great mistake, so I have no hesitation in saying that, for the benefit of our joint community, I shall find no difficulty at all in keeping single."

"Eve, you must promise, too," said Charlie, looking at her rather severely, for Eve had said nothing yet. "You would not, of course, like to spoil everything directly we are settled for some confounded nonsense of this kind."

"It would be a beastly shame of you if you did," said Tom with energy.

"Of course, Eve will promise; did you ever know Eve do a dirty trick yet?" cried Gerald indignantly.

"No, she's a brick is Eve."

"A real ripper."

"Dear boys," said Eve, with her pretty smile, "I have never thought about marrying anybody; why should I, seeing that nobody has ever asked me? and I don't know why anybody ever should," she added simply, for Eve had been like that flower of which the poet sings, and had "blushed unseen" hitherto in the dinginess of her London home, and amongst the somewhat dreary gravity of her father's old-fashioned friends. Marriage, indeed, was an event which at that period of her life seemed to be as far removed out of her way as the Millennium.

So they went down to South Meadowshire and set up their hunters, and their grooms, and their other household gods, and settled themselves down at Miswall, alias Misrule, and after the first good run of the season, where Miss Latimer was in at the death, and was presented with the brush by the master, and when it was fairly owned that the Latimer boys, one and all, went like young

fiends, then South Meadowshire came and called upon the quaint young family, with difficulty, no doubt, by reason of the obscurity which surrounded the whereabouts of the front door, but still with alacrity and heartiness, because of that genuine admiration with which good riders and keen sportsmen are always sure to be regarded in the jolly hunting shires of our native land.



Chapter the Fourth.

A HUNTING MORNING.

"Far in front her form is fleeting,
And her gentle heart is beating,
With the rapture of the revel as it sweeps across the
plain,
Then I press by dint of riding
Where my beacon star is guiding.

* * * * *

Now I wish I were the bridle
In the fingers of my idol.
Now I wish I were the bonny steed that bore her
through the run."

WHYTE MELVILLE.





CHAPTER IV.

A HUNTING MORNING.

"Far in front her form is fleeting,
And her gentle heart is beating,
With the rapture of the revel as it sweeps across the plain,
Then I press by dint of riding
Where my beacon star is guiding.

* * * * *

Now I wish I were the bridle
In the fingers of my idol.
Now I wish I were the bonny steed that bore her through
the run."

WHYTE MELVILLE.

Now, Eve on horseback, riding forth in the morning with that escort of her three ruddy-faced, strong-limbed young brothers beside her, was always to my mind a very fair sight indeed. The graceful, pliant young figure sat so easily and yet so firmly, the sweet childish profile, short-nosed and full-lipped, stood out with such delicate clearness against the sober greys and violets of the winter landscape, and

there was such a happy, fearless look in the red-brown eyes that were filled with an eager anticipation of coming pleasure, that it was a very joy and delight to behold her.

I do not know that so pretty and so charming a young woman could ever have been out of place in any situation of her life ; but, when you saw Eve Latimer in the saddle, you became instantly convinced that here she was in the very place on earth which suited her best, and in which she was most at home.

To-day, the November sunshine lights up the satin flanks of her favourite chestnut mare, and flickers, too, upon the red-gold knot of plaits at the back of her small head. The boys ride about her—they are proud of their “two chestnuts,” as they call them fondly.

It is pretty to see Eve amongst her brothers ; there is something half-queen, half-mother in the place she holds amongst them. They look her over from head to foot critically, and yet admiringly. One sees to her girths, another to her stirrup. Charlie is not sure about the new bridle—Gerald thinks her old saddle

fitted her better, and little Tom is quite certain there isn't another girl in all the shires can beat her—not one! They have a good six miles to ride to the meet. Sometimes the four all ride abreast, where the road is wide enough, and then there are shouts of laughter and whole volleys of innocent little jokes to be heard. By-and-by they strike into a bridle road, and here Gerald and Charlie drop behind, or else Gerald keeps his place at her right hand, and Charlie rides on, or else it is Charlie who stays by her, and Gerald who falls back a little; but always, and under all circumstances, "little Tom," as he is called, keeps his place at his sister's right hand. That is conceded to him by a sort of natural right which the others never think of disputing.

Little Tom is like Eve, absurdly like her—but, oh! wonderful freak of that queer trickster whom we call Nature—whilst Eve is a lovely young woman, little Tom is an ugly boy. Eve's skin is as clear and as fair as a water-lily, but Tom is covered with freckles. Eve's nose is a study after Greuze—Tom's,

equally short and shapely up to a certain point, has somehow widened itself out by a mere hair's breadth at the end, and has become, in consequence, a study after nothing at all but its own ugly self. Eve's pretty mouth looks as good for kisses as for laughter, but Tom's, although most ready with laughter of the loudest description, suggests no further ideas more poetical than the consumption of his daily food. Gerald is wont to say that the Almighty intended to create Tom after the exact image of Eve, but that in some irritating fashion Tom took the law in his own hands, and turned himself out a failure. Tom is the veriest young scapegrace of the lot—always in mischief, always up to some prank or other, always calling down Eve's righteous anger upon himself, and yet, mother-like, it is Tom who is the nearest to her heart of hearts.

Presently, the little cavalcade reaches the edge of a low hill, and there, in the hollow beneath them, they catch sight of red coats moving slowly backwards and forwards, and a motley crowd of horsemen and carriages

gathered together in a confused group—whilst a little apart, under the shelter of a haystack in a corner of a field, lies a low compact mass of speckled, moving bodies, and a flickering forest of white waving tails guarded by a couple of whips.

“There are the hounds,” says Eve.

“In capital time after all,” remarks Charlie, consulting his watch.

“No, it is the master who is late, as usual, luckily for us.”

“My eye! what a crowd,” cries little Tom. “Gerald, do you see Mrs. Clitheroe in her pony-carriage? There, she is waiting for you. She is aweary, she is aweary—I can see it in her eye, or I could if her eye was near enough to me to see—don’t blush, dear boy. Eve, what nuts Gerald is on that woman—do look at him blushing.”

“Do hold your tongue, Tom, and don’t talk rubbish,” says Gerald shifting uneasily in his saddle, and blushing furiously.

Charlie laughs softly :

“It doesn’t signify, you know, old fellow, as

she is married. We are only prohibited from marrying, you know, not from making love."

"Especially to our neighbours' wives," remarks Tom.

"Ye powers, listen to that baby's morals!"

"Come on, boys," says Eve, with a little frown of annoyance; "and I do wish you wouldn't allow your tongues to run away with your discretion." She puts her mare into a canter, and her brothers follow her swiftly down the smooth green slope which divides them from the assembled crowd below.

There is a large field out to-day, for it is a favourite meet, and if only the fox break the right way, the sportsmen may promise themselves a run across the very cream of Meadowshire.

In Meadowshire, be it understood, we have large flat grass fields, big fences, if you like, such as none but genuine horsemen care to face; but we are, for the most part, spared all small annoyances in the shape of plough and turnips, and those picturesque steep-sided hills, covered with loose flints, which are an

abomination both unto horse and rider. Therefore, in Meadowshire, there are gathered together hard riders from all parts of the earth. Londoners, who come down with season tickets twice a week, soldiers on long leave, who put up at the country inns with their horses, and not a few foreigners, of enterprising and ambitious souls, anxious to witness "le sport" under its best and finest conditions, and to be initiated into its most solemn mysteries, who take up their abode in our midst with a courageous disregard of the climate which they justly pronounce to be so detestable.

We are cosmopolitan above all, therefore, in Meadowshire, and to be cosmopolitan in these days is to cast away a good many of the more contemptible failings of human nature. For instance, who in South Meadowshire cares a fig whether you are rich or poor? who will take the trouble to inquire whether a man's grandfather be a lord or a shopkeeper, so long only as he can ride straight and well to hounds, be pleasant and cheery at the covert side,

and not be given to any underhand tricks of riding over other people, or cutting in at gates, or other such like unpardonable sins.

To be able "to go," that is the only path to favour down in Meadowshire. If you can "go," you will be popular, whether you live in a cottage or a palace, and if you can't go, you will be voted "chalk," and you might just as well stay away.

So it is that there are not a few congratulations and remarks of satisfaction uttered this morning over the fact that Mr. Richard Gaskell reigns at Hollowcroft Hall, instead of his cousin George, lately deceased, and these are more especially called forth to-day owing to the fact that Dick is out for the first time since his relative's death, and is sitting hard by on his big flea-bitten grey, looking brave and handsome and gay, surrounded by a group of men all eager to shake him by the hand and to wish him joy of his new-gotten wealth.

It was very sad, of course, about poor George Gaskell, said the friends one to the other, just on the eve of his marriage and all ; but, then,

he never was any good in the country, wasn't poor George.

"A dreadful muff!"

"Couldn't go a yard!"

"Didn't know he ever tried to get on a horse's back," said little Major Spicer, a small wiry looking man, who habitually rode great raw-boned sixteen hand animals, upon which he sat perched up like a monkey upon an elephant.

"Oh, yes, he used sometimes to trot up and down the road for a bit, but he never went over a fence in his life. Oh, law! he was a duffer, and no mistake; poor chap!"

"Come, you fellows, don't go on abusing a dead man," here remonstrated old Colonel Slowcombe; "remember he can't speak up for himself now; though, to be sure, Dick is an improvement on him in every way—a thorough sportsman and a downright genial good fellow—which nobody could say of the other."

"I wonder if he will marry Miss Harlowe?" here meditatively remarked that pretty Mrs.

Clitheroe, of whom mention has already been made, as she leant back in her phaeton, and stroked the flank of one of her smart little brown ponies with the end of her whip.

"He's bound to give her the chance, I should say," answered the man who happened to be nearest to her.

Mrs. Clitheroe threw up her saucy little head at him.

"Now, that is where you men are so foolish. Why, pray, is the poor man to be forced into an unwilling marriage with a girl who wouldn't have him when he was poor, and will probably jump at him now he is rich? In his place, how I should rejoice in turning the tables on the Harlowes!"

"Ah, my dear," here broke in a lady on a bay thoroughbred who was standing on the further side of Mrs. Clitheroe's low phaeton. "You may depend upon it, Lady Harlowe is fit to tear her hair out with rage; what wouldn't she give to whistle him back again?"

"She's a spiteful old cat!" rejoined Mrs. Clitheroe with an energy born of strong

personal feeling ; “ and it will serve her right, Mrs. Trimmer, if she never catches Dick Gaskell again ! ”

“ She never will, my dear, never ! Once they slip the line, these men never are caught twice by the same bait, especially when they are rich.”

“ Ah, well, you ought to know, love,” Mrs. Clitheroe answered with a careless laugh, “ for you’ve had more experience than most of us, I believe.”

An observation which caused Mrs. Trimmer, who was a widow, and was reported to have angled for half the marriageable men in the county, to remove herself to a safe distance from her more successful rival.

“ Upon my word, Lucy,” said the man at her right hand, “ you gave it her too hot that time ; indeed you did ! ”

“ Horrid little woman, I detest her ; besides, she was in my light ; I couldn’t see through her horse ; and who gave you leave to call me by my christian name, Major Tracey ? ”

Dick Gaskell's eyes were wandering somewhat restlessly amongst the fast gathering crowd. He was looking for somebody—somebody whom he had not seen for a very long time, nearly two years—would she come? Would she be out to-day? If she came, would she remember him—remember how and where they parted? Would she meet him as a stranger—or how?

Whilst he asked himself all these questions, some one near him said idly :

“Here comes old Lady Harlowe's chariot; now, perhaps, as royalty has arrived, we shall be permitted to set to work!”

An old-fashioned yellow barouche, drawn by two big ancient grey horses, driven by a fat coachman in a powdered wig and knee breeches, was just turning the corner of the lane. In the carriage sat two ladies, one old and one young, and by the side of it rode a thin, dark man in a scarlet coat and a velvet cap. This was Mr. Frederick Harlowe, Lord Harlowe's nephew, and master of the South Meadowshire foxhounds. Fred Harlowe bent

over his saddle and talked eagerly to his aunt and cousin, but an M.F.H., even if he is in love, must attend to business on a hunting morning, and as soon as the yellow barouche had drawn up by the roadside, he trotted away in the direction of the hounds under the lee of the haystack.

Then Dick Gaskell saw his opportunity, and made straight for Lady Harlowe's carriage. And it was at this moment, when skirting the crowd in order to get round to it, that an avalanche intercepted his path in the shape of the whole of the Latimer family, that came cantering down the grass slope to the left of him, and poured itself, chattering and laughing together, on to the road at right angles to him between himself and the yellow carriage. Dick Gaskell drew his rein sharply up, and only just in time, for Eve very nearly cannoned against him—his horse's nose, in fact, brushed against her saddle.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" cried Eve, and turned two laughing eyes upon him and the sweetest face, all flushed with health and

exercise, that Dick thought he had ever seen.

And then they became engulfed, as it were, into the crowd, all four of them. Everybody pressed round them, everybody reached out hands to them, everybody called out to them at once.

“Here you are at last!”

“Began to think you were not coming!”

“Better late than never!”

“How did you get your family off, Miss Eve?”

“Oh, I thought I should never get them up,” cried back Eve laughing. “Would you believe it, that I had to tie their ties, and stick in their pins, and help to pull on their boots before one of them would stir; I had been up hours myself, and shaved the poodle and exercised the new pony, and they wouldn’t even get up for their breakfast; they would only hang out of their windows and laugh!”

Eve always talked of her brothers generically, as “they.”

“Who is it?” whispered Dick to the man

next him, who happened to be Colonel Slowcombe, following Eve with eyes that seemed unable to tear themselves away from her.

“Why, don’t you know the Latimers? Oh, no, by-the-way, they have only been here a year; they were not here when last you were down; it’s Miss Latimer and her brothers; they live at Miswall—*Misrule* we call it now, for they are all as mad as March hares.”

“But who are they? Where do they come from?”

“Ah, that is more than I can tell you; London town, I believe, but they can ride like blazes, every one of them, and everybody likes them.”

Dick had forgotten the yellow chariot altogether. He realized this with a pang of self-reproach when he found that everybody suddenly turned round and trotted briskly away in one direction; the hounds were moving on ahead, the time for “coffee-housing” was over. Dick turned, too, with the rest; it was not likely he would do otherwise. A man doesn’t get himself thrown out of the chance of

a place in the hunting field for the sake of a woman, not of any woman, however dear she may be. He must love indeed, and with a love which is akin to drivelling imbecility, before he can forget to put himself and his pleasures in the first place, and the woman who loves him in the second. It's the kind of thing that so seldom happens that women themselves have ceased to expect it. Of course he will think of himself first, they all do, and a wise woman will never dream of disputing the incontrovertible fact, any more than she would rebel against the unalterable laws of nature. That all men are selfish, is one of the only absolute certainties concerning humanity to which modern philosophy is able to bring us, and another is that where one or the other must have the worst of it, it is the woman who goes to the wall, and the man who rides away to enjoy himself. Yet Dick had conscience-pricks (they are not, mercifully, quite allowed to go scot-free of these), when, like a flash, as he rode away, he saw the yellow carriage turn round, preparing to go home to Cambray Castle, and a

pale drooping face within that looked a little tired and a little weary, and eyes that were surely wistful, and, oh, so sad, as they gazed mutely reproachful after his quickly-vanishing figure.

And then he forgot her. There was a good run, a splendid thing, of some five-and-twenty minutes, without a check. Dick was well to the front—the stragglers were left far behind—his grey horse carried him well and straightly, the morning air whizzed past him with exhilarating keenness, the sensation of being once more in the saddle, flying over field and fence, got into his head and intoxicated him; it was worth while to have come into his cousin's money for this—for this alone. Is there any pursuit on earth equal to it, or any idol whatsoever that a man can worship with so great a fervour of delight! Was it likely that Dick would be giving a thought to that pale sad face that was being carried slowly homewards in the old yellow chariot when there was this glorious, madly-delightful race after those

white dancing bodies that kept ever on and on, flying away only a field's breadth in front of him. How could he think of a woman now? Or if any woman does fill his eye or pass flash-like through his fancy, will it not rather be that slight yielding figure on the bright chestnut, with the red-brown knob of hair that speeds on always just in front of him, aggravatingly in front of him, taking her fences neatly and swiftly without a pause, without even a momentary hesitation, so that Dick, strive as he may to pass her, has no chance even of giving her a lead.

"She can go—that Miss Latimer—and no mistake!" he thinks to himself as he watches her.

A little behind him come two of her brothers, Charlie and little Tom; Gerald is nowhere to be seen.

Eve is so accustomed to be in the front, so used to finding herself just ahead, with her boys behind her, that, without turning her head to see, she takes it for granted that it is one of them who is following her so close.

"Take care," she shouts out, holding up her hand; "bear to the left, there's a nasty stake by the thorn bush," and over she goes, and Dick Gaskell after her, pulling up together on the further side as they find the hounds all huddled up in the middle of the field, and the huntsman blowing a triumphant blast over poor Reynard's sudden and untimely collapse.

"Thank you very much, Miss Latimer," says Dick to his fair guide, lifting his hat as he speaks.

Eve looks a little surprised.

"I thought it was one of my brothers," she answers apologetically.

"But for that fortunate mistake, then, I might have been staked!" says Dick smiling.

"Oh, I am so glad that I warned you. I have made amends, I hope, for nearly knocking you over at the meet!" she answers, smiling back at him frankly and sweetly. And Dick told himself once again she had the very most delightful face that he had ever seen in his life.



Chapter the Fifth.

CAMBRAY CASTLE.

“The dreary intercourse of daily life.”

WORDSWORTH.





CHAPTER V.

CAMBRAY CASTLE.

"The dreary intercourse of daily life."

WORDSWORTH.

THERE was only one hill, worthy to be called a hill, in all South Meadowshire, and upon the apex of that hill stood Cambray Castle.

There could be no doubt of it that Cambray Castle was, as the house agents would have described it to be, very imposingly situated.

It was imposing altogether. There were two grey towers, flanking a grey arched gateway—on one of the towers there floated a flag with all the arms and quarterings of the Harlowe family displayed upon it on a crimson ground—beneath the archway was a draw-bridge, that had never, however, been constructed to draw up and down; within, you

could see a glimpse of a grey courtyard, and mullioned windows all the way round it, and a high gabled roof, with coloured glass windows, that might have been a family chapel, only, unfortunately, it was only built to look like one, and was nothing more in reality than the servants' dining-room. There was also a flight of stone steps that led outside the house from the ground to an upper storey that were most picturesque and ancient in appearance—it was quite sad to think that they were only copied from an old design, and had nothing in truth that was old or interesting about them. That was the worst of Cambray Castle; it was imposing certainly, but then, if you happened to know about it, it ceased to impose upon you, because it was all built by Lord Harlowe's father, and had been standing exactly three-and-seventy years instead of three hundred, which it professed to do. Still, there was a good deal of grey stone and ivy about it, and persons who were superficial in their notions were content to take it for what it was worth, and to talk of it as a "fine old place."

Nor was Lord Harlowe himself at all out of keeping with the respectable flavour of antiquity which clung to the two round towers of his castellated mansion.

Lord Harlowe was a very fine old gentleman indeed. He was in appearance exceedingly tall and stately, with a high, smooth forehead, off which the hair had gradually melted away into nothingness; he had a heavy nose, of which he was vain, holding it in reverence as an emblem of blue blood and Norman descent. He had a pair of fine pale grey eyes that opened widely and looked very straightly at all inferior creatures, an upper lip whose length would not have been a discreditable match to that of the Radical member for Northampton, and beneath it the weakest, flabbiest, feeblest mouth and chin that mortal man was ever cursed with. It was a splendid face at the top, but it fell away into the chaos of nothingness below.

A physiognomist could have described Lord Harlowe's character at a glance; great pride of birth and of station, a high sense of honour,

a strict adherence to everything that is honest and noble and chivalrous—that was the bright side of the picture. Then came the obstinacy of a pig or a mule, the narrow-mindedness of a hermit, and the foolishness of a spoilt baby—that was the reverse of it.

Lord Harlowe has just entered the dining-room at Cambray Castle—he rather likes it to be called the banqueting hall, only nobody will humour him in this little matter. Lady Harlowe and her daughter have just sat down to lunch. Lady Harlowe is tall, like her husband; her face is less handsome, but more intelligent than his; she is a clever-looking old lady, and there is great strength of purpose in her full, square chin, and in the straight lines of her stern and somewhat forbidding mouth. She is a woman who knows her own mind thoroughly, and who gets her own way absolutely by sheer strength of will and doggedness of purpose. As Lord Harlowe entered the room, two powdered footmen flew to shut the door for him, and to draw back his high oak arm-chair from the foot of the table for him. Lord

Harlowe stood in his place with a hand resting on each corner of the table, and surveyed the repast that was laid out. There was a great deal that was very impressive about the aspect of the table. There were four huge silver covers, one at each end and one at each side. There were several smaller ones dotted at intervals about the white tablecloth; there was a set of silver-gilt tankards and goblets in the centre, and so large a display of minor objects, of solid silver and silver-mounted, old cut-glass, as would have been sufficient to excite in the mind of any unwary guest a keen and delightful anticipation of the pleasures of the table shortly to be enjoyed by him.

Perhaps it was by reason of a long and disastrous experience that Lord Harlowe's countenance displayed none of that gratification at the prospect of the feast laid out before his eyes which might have been reasonably expected of him.

"What have we here?" he said, uplifting the silver cover before him. There were displayed in a lake of pale brown gravy two

mutton chops, resting comfortably side by side.

“Dawes, remove the covers,” said her ladyship, and straightway there appeared at her end of the table two drumsticks of a chicken grilled. The side dishes revealed other dainties in the shape of three potatoes and a little lump of cabbage, and there were further delicacies in the form of rice pudding and jam tartlets in other places.

“Constance, love, what will you take?”

“A chop, please, mamma,” but added quickly on perceiving the *soupçon* of a frown on the maternal brow; “oh, no, a little grill, please; I really don’t care which.”

Lord Harlowe helped himself to both mutton chops at once. Lady Harlowe and her daughter had a drumstick apiece.

“There is really not enough to eat,” grumbled the master of the house.

“My dear!” from Lady Harlowe, full of distress, “could you eat another chop? You can have one cooked directly if you like? Dawes, another chop for his lordship.”

"No, no ; certainly not, I have plenty. But yourself and Constance, my dear."

"Oh, Constance and I are small eaters, are we not, Constance ?"

"But if anybody should drop in—a hunting morning, too ?" objected her spouse.

"Nobody will drop in," replied Lady Harlowe decidedly ; "I never encourage that kind of thing. In these days when butchers' meat is so dear one cannot be expected to keep open-house. We must entertain, of course, at stated intervals, according to our station, but all that kind of promiscuous running in and out of people's houses, which is so much the fashion now, is what I will never lend myself to. Nobody thanks you for a lunch—it doesn't count at all ; it only runs up the weekly bills for nothing, and promotes a great deal of idle gossip amongst young people."

There was a severe glance at her daughter at the last few words.

Poor Constance sighed.

"Are you not well, Constance ?"

"Quite well, thank you, mamma," she went on meekly, picking away at her drumstick.

Poor pale Constance! How sad was her life, shut up always, like an enchanted princess, between these two old parents. How eloquent of perpetual disappointment and repression was the drooping head, the thin regular features, that were like her father's even down to the weak sensitive mouth that had never dared yet to stand up for itself or to fight its own battles. Such a grey colourless life it had been! Only the grandeur of her father's house, the daily solemn progress in the yellow chariot, the set, stiff dinner parties once a month, an occasional ball in the winter, and the perpetual surveillance of every thought and action which never ceased winter or summer. Do these things make up for laughter and fun, and all the glad recklessness of youth when one is twenty-four, and the blood still runs quickly in one's veins? Once, and once only, there had come into her life a wild and vivid gleam of joy and life and love. One who had loved her—and who had dared to speak his love—

even to her—poor captive as she was—one who had ventured to say to Lord Harlowe's only daughter, "I love you ; what matter that I am poor—stick to me, and I will wait for you—tell them boldly that you will marry me and none other—brave it out, and they will give way in time, and we shall be all the happier for the struggle we have fought through together."

Could Constance ever forget the brave strong words, the eager face, the love-glow in the passionate grey-blue eyes that looked so closely into hers under the red glow of the Chinese lanterns in the conservatory at Mrs. Clitheroe's ball two years ago? Could she ever forget the warm grasp of the two strong hands or the kisses that were stolen from her terrified lips in that shadowy corner where her life's story had been played out? Ah! never! never! Then had come fears, vacillation, confessions, wrung from her by the stern dominant spirit of her mother, and a fiat that went forth in the early morning.

"Marry Richard Gaskell, Constance! You

must be mad—and what impertinence on the part of the young man! Why he has not a penny, only what his cousin George allows him, and no prospects whatever.”

“But, mamma, I told him, I promised him,” gasped poor Constance through her tears; “he is coming this morning to see me.”

“Oh, never mind what you told him, my dear; young ladies’ words go for nothing in these matters, if their parents don’t give their approval. And *I* will see Mr. Richard Gaskell when he calls; you need not be at all distressed about it.”

And then came the waiting upstairs in her own room, knowing that her lover was below closeted with her mother. How she wept, and how she shivered with misery and fear! And then the drawing-room bell rang, and she knew that he would be going, and there did come a sort of wild, despairing courage to her; she flew down the wide staircase.

Dick was crossing the hall below; two footmen were opening the front door. He

stopped when he saw her, and turned upon her a face that was stern and bitter with anger, and white with disappointed love. There was just half a minute when she might have spoken, and all might yet have been well between them, but there were those two powdered men, standing like Gog and Magog, immovable on each side of the open door, in their liveries and their white stockings! How could she speak, even in a whisper, before them? All the reserve of a proud and cold race stood up between herself and the man she loved; it was only a minute, and then the opportunity was gone for ever. Lady Harlowe had come forth from the drawing-room behind her, and passed her hand through her daughter's arm.

"You are wishing Mr. Gaskell good-bye, Constance? He is going away, he tells me."

"Am I to go? Do *you* say that I am to go?" he asked, hoarsely and wildly, regardless of Gog and Magog by the door.

"Yes, certainly; it is better for you not to idle away your time doing nothing; in Lon-

don you will find something to do, Mr. Gaskell; a man who has no means must put his shoulder to the wheel and work."

It was Lady Harlowe who spoke. Constance never uttered a sound; she was white as death; a sort of numbness paralyzed her; she had not even the power to weep—she could only stand there motionless, as cold as ice and silent as the grave. But Dick would make her speak.

"Tell me yourself—with your own lips," he urged hotly. "I will not go otherwise. Is it true what your mother says, that you have regretted what you said the other night, and that you wish me to go away?"

There was the stern pressure of her mother's hand upon her arm. She was frightened to death—terrified beyond words—she did not dare to be brave.

"Yes, I suppose so," was all that fell at length from her dry, parched lips, and then he turned and left her, and Gog and Magog shut out the sound of his departing footsteps for ever.

Afterwards, when it was too late, how Constance Harlowe wept and sobbed and bemoaned herself! What sleepless nights of agony she endured, what martyrdom of joyless, hopeless days! Ah! we do well to cover up and hide these sorrows that all of us go through once, at least, in our lives; sorrows for which there is no cure, no solace, no consolation, save in the gradual hardening of our own hearts, and the healing touch of that most merciful of all human consolers, whose name is Time.

Now all this happened two years ago, and Constance has long ago gone back to the grey monotony of her joyless life. At the time, her little story and its sad ending got abroad, somehow, as all these stories do, nobody quite knows how, but nobody blamed her; it was Lady Harlowe's doing, of course—nobody doubted that; but how foolish of poor, dear impecunious Dick Gaskell to imagine, with his debts and his lack of prospects, that he was likely to be allowed to marry Lord Harlowe's only daughter! And then Dick vanished out

of South Meadowshire, and went away to London, where he ran into worse debt than ever, gambled a little, backed several unlucky horses, gave a few sumptuous dinners at his club, and made love to one or two of his neighbours' wives; treating one, at least, of them very badly, and all with an idea that he was obliged to do these things because he was a blighted and miserable being, still hopelessly in love, at the bottom of his heart, with Constance Harlowe.

But Constance had no such distractions. Women never have. Men have many ways of getting over these blows to the heart that are so hard to endure. A man goes away; he has change of scene to begin with; he can court amusement, run after pleasure, fling himself madly into the stream of life, and if all else fails, he can at all events go to the devil! But a woman can do nothing to stifle her love. A woman must sit at home; she must daily behold the scenes of her former happiness, revisit the places where once she was so blessed, and has now become so

desolate. The same things, the same persons, the same occupations are ever going on, only with all the life, all the joy, all the sunshine taken out of them for ever. No wonder that men forget, that they drown one love comfortably, and are soon quite ready for another, whilst women have no other choice but to cling on for years with a helpless persistency to the shattered wreck of their ruined and spoilt lives.

People forgot Constance Harlowe's love troubles, but Constance herself never forgot. Because she was pale and quiet, she was reckoned dull; heartless, because she made no sign; passionless, because she was patient. She was none of those things; she was loving and true and constant; only one thing was lacking to her, and for want of that one thing her life was a failure—perhaps would always be one. She had no pluck. She had never dared to go against the strong will of her mother; had never ventured even to reproach her for the part she had played with regard to her lover; she was of a timidity

that was almost incredible ; was afflicted with a moral cowardice that well-nigh amounted to a disease. She firmly believed that Dick Gaskell loved her as devotedly still as he had once professed to do, but she had no more power of lifting a finger to bring him back to her side than if she had been made of stone. For a long time, indeed, it seemed to her that her love was absolutely hopeless, and then suddenly there came news that filled her once more with hope.

This was the news of the sudden death of Mr. George Gaskell, of Hollowcroft, and the unexpected succession of his cousin to his estates.

Then, indeed, she did hope once more. But her hopes were not unmixed with grave fears. Would he forgive her and come back to her again, she wondered, now that he was a rich man, and that her mother would presumably no longer forbid her to marry him ? She could not tell.

When her mother made that little speech concerning the extreme improbability of

droppers-in at lunch time at Cambray Castle, Constance had sighed. Full well did she know how superhuman would be the courage of that rash mortal who should venture, uninvited, to show his face at the family lunch table ; indeed, when she looked around at the empty dishes and the small remnants of rice pudding and vegetables which alone decorated the festive board, she could hardly regret that this should be the case. But still, she had seen him to-day, only far away in the distance across the crowd, too far to exchange so much as a nod or a smile. And he had seemed as if he was coming to her—how wildly her heart had beat just for a few golden moments of hope—and then, something had stopped him as he approached her, somebody had spoken to him, and he had never come at all.

The order had gone forth to the fat coachman to turn round and go home, for never did Lady Harlowe condescend to follow for even a hundred yards along the road in the wake of the hounds. She drove to the meet

when it was within an easy drive, and when the meet was over she went home; and so the yellow chariot had turned round, and Constance saw that brave, handsome figure on the flea-bitten grey no more.

In such a fashion was it that the sight of him, so earnestly longed for, so piteously prayed for, with such passions of hopeless sobs, was at last granted to her. She had almost rather never have seen him again.

Her father was talking pompously about the county politics and the seat that was expected shortly to be vacant.

“Old Boyds can’t last much longer,” he was saying; “two attacks of bronchitis like that in a winter! bound to carry him off if he has a third, as I was saying to Grandham yesterday. ‘Grandham,’ I said, ‘mark my words, Boyds won’t last, and there will be a vacancy before Easter, and then my nephew will stand for the county.’ A Harlowe ought to be in Parliament, as I have always told you, my lady, if not the reigning family, then the next branch. Fred is bound to do it—

noblesse oblige—persons in our position belong not so much to themselves as to the nation.”

“Fred won’t like giving up the hounds,” remarked his wife.

Lord Harlowe spread out his hands with a gesture of dissent.

“Young men must put their likes and dislikes aside in cases like this—if my nephew desires to realize his ambitions,” and here Lord Harlowe gave a glance at his daughter.

Lady Harlowe coughed slightly; Constance played with the spoon upon her empty plate. Oh, yes, she knew what was meant very well. Her father would give her to her cousin, if he could, and her mother—what would her mother do? That was the question, and it did not occur to poor meek Constance that she herself was capable of having a voice in the matter. Would her mother, too, give her over to her cousin Fred? whom she liked—oh, yes, she liked him very much, because he was always kind and gentle to her—would Lady Harlowe join forces with her father, or would Dick Gaskell’s return as a wealthy man

influence her decision in any way? Constance played with the spoon upon her empty plate and wondered, whilst her father went on droning away about the expected vacancy and the Liberal candidate, and her cousin's prospects of being returned; things which she had heard about so often that there was no longer any interest or any novelty left about them. What a grey, colourless life it was?

"If we have finished, we may as well go upstairs, my love," her mother was saying.

Would nothing ever happen again to set her heart beating and her pulses on fire?

And then all at once something did happen. Just as they were rising from the table there came a sudden sound. The echoing clatter of a horse's hoofs over the sham drawbridge and from under the shadowy greyness of the imitation Tudor archway there came forth a horseman on a flea-bitten grey.

"There is nothing to eat!" cried Lady Harlowe nervously. "Ring the bell, and tell them to show him upstairs, Constance."

And Constance, looking through the small diamond panes of the mullioned window, saw that her old lover was coming back to her.





Chapter the Sixth.

GOOD RESOLUTIONS.

A man so various that he seems to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome,
. . . . always in the wrong,
Was everything by starts and nothing long."

DRYDEN.





CHAPTER VI.

GOOD RESOLUTIONS.

"A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome,
. . . . always in the wrong,
Was everything by starts, and nothing long."

DRYDEN.

I WISH it to be clearly understood that Richard Gaskell was by no means a vicious or a wicked man. He was no Lothario, no unprincipled villain bent upon inveigling innocent and confiding young womanhood to its destruction. True that he generally yielded to the temptation of the moment, without much thought of future consequences, but when things turned out badly, Dick was as much surprised and as heartily sorry as anybody. His character might be summed up in a very few words—he was a somewhat weak-natured and very

impressionable young man, with a tender heart and a great longing for feminine sympathy. He was a little bit spoilt, by reason of his good looks; a little bit indolent, because he had never had anything to do; a little bit selfish, because it had never occurred to him to consider others before he considered himself. It might, perhaps, be added that he was at times almost heartless in his disregard of the feelings of others, although he was often deeply moved about his own. He was by no means devoid of a conscience, and its existence was most exceedingly unpleasant to him. Now, Dick disliked unpleasant things, and had a way of shuffling out of them whenever he could with any decency manage to do so.

With so delicately strung an organization as this, it will not be supposed that he had turned his back upon a certain fishing village far away upon the Devonshire coast without many qualms and pricks of that conscience which, although it may be a moral blessing to humanity, is no doubt a form of blessing

which we most of us would be glad enough to dispense with.

When the news had at length reached him that his cousin had died intestate, and that he himself had inherited his wealth and property, Dick had at first been almost stunned by the magnitude of his good fortune. A very few hours, however, had sufficed to bring home to him the alteration in his prospects, for sudden wealth is much easier to bear with fortitude than sudden poverty; and a man accustoms himself to prosperity more rapidly than he does to adversity; and it is certain that even during the first shock of surprise our friend never lost his head. For instance, he never betrayed the contents of a certain fat blue letter which he received to old Stephen Colston and his daughter—nor did he say aught to account for his sudden departure from the cottage that had sheltered him for so many weeks, save what might be gathered from a few vague and incoherent allusions to “important family matters” which summoned him away hurriedly, and as he

desired it to be understood, very unwillingly.

“Ye’ll be coming back again fast enough I warrant, my boy!” cried the old seaman in all good faith, smacking his future son-in-law heartily on the shoulder, with a strength which caused Dick to wince, not from the pricks of his conscience, but from the physical force of the brawny fist which Stephen laid upon him. “And if it’s your fam’ly as wants you—why, I don’t say but what you’re right. Your mother, did ye say, Dick? Ah, well, a son is right enough to leave his sweetheart for his mother.”

Dick—whose mother, a severe, iron-grey woman, who chiefly lived in his memory owing to the hardness and boniness of maternal hands which were wont long ago to come into frequent contact with his infantine ears, and who had now lain for many years in the family vault in Hollowcroft churchyard—allowed it nevertheless to be assumed that this glorified saint (is not every man’s mother, when dead, a glorified saint?) certainly had

something to say to his sudden departure from Crowbay.

“ You’ll come back again ! ” repeated Stephen cheerily, for he thought he had got his game safe and sure—was not Dick a pauper, and was not he, Stephen Colston, a warm man—a man of means, who could give him his daughter and pay his debts for him at the same time ?—“ oh, you’ll come back again fast enough, and with the ring in your pocket, I’ll be bound.”

But Dick knew very well that he would never come back. As to Avice, she packed up his portmanteau for him with her own hands, putting into them to the full as many tears as there were socks and shirts—for this going away was terrible to Avice ; she knew better far than her father did how slender was the hold she had over her lover, and how more than possible it might be that in absence, and a return to the society of his own class, he might forget her. Yet, she, too, clung to his poverty as the one strong link in her cause. He was so poor, his own people did not want

him—that was what she gathered—but to her, in his poverty, he was infinitely valuable—a little because she was genuinely fond of him, but far more, because, through him, she expected to enter those golden portals of a world that was all a blaze of glory to her ignorant fancy—a world where she should be “as good as the best of them,” where she would be made “a real lady of.”

“You’ll come back,” she too said to him, clinging about his neck, and pressing her pretty tear-stained face against his shoulder. “You’ll not desert me, Dick, will you?—me as loves you so!”

“Desert you!” echoed Dick, with an uncomfortable laugh. “What a tragic little girl it is, and what fine words she uses!”

But he knew at the bottom of his heart that that was what he meant to do, and, perhaps, Avice guessed it too. Of course Avice was to write to him; she had talked a great deal about letters, and he had promised to write to her first—and he did so, posting a little note

to her the moment he reached London, a loving little letter, full of "darlings" and "dearests," that dwelt upon the regret he felt at leaving her pretty blue eyes behind him, and of the many times during the railway journey he had wished he could have had her sitting near him. It was a lover-like letter, and yet even to himself it read more like an adieu to a happy time that was over than the first written words which a man sends to the woman who is shortly to be his wife. There was, for instance, no word of himself in it, from beginning to end. He did not tell her of his plans—of whom he was going to see, of what he was going to do, nor was there, from the first word to the last, a single allusion to the time of his return. When Avice had read it she put it into her pocket and did not show it to her father, and she was very silent and quiet all day. She was neither well educated nor clever, but she was shrewd enough to read between the lines of that letter, and she guessed that Dick meant to break away from her if he could. Still, the

thought of his poverty comforted her ; he was not likely, she thought, to be able to remain in London long—he would have to come back some day. She strove to take heart and courage by this reflection, and she wrote to him as he had told her, to an address which he had given her. It was the first which had come into his head, an unpretentious lodging in a far western suburb, where once, in the days of his extremest difficulties, he had lodged for a few weeks, and which he had been glad enough to leave as soon as possible. He had a vague idea that if Avice wrote there he would call some day when he had time, and fetch her letters away, but that day never came. What with his new position, his new duties and pleasures—appointments with lawyers concerning the settlement of his investments, appointments with tradesmen who were employed in making him a new outfit, interviews with horse-dealers concerning the purchase of hunters, his time in town was so fully taken up that Avice's letters, and Avice herself, became soon utterly forgotten.

And then he went down to Hollowcroft, and his new life began in earnest, and that summer idyl upon the Devonshire coast became to him a vague shadowy thing of the past, that faded away day by day into a dim unreality, until at length it almost seemed as though it had not been himself, but some other man altogether, who had dwelt under Stephen Colston's roof, and had made love in the long July and August days to his pretty daughter.

As to Avice's letters, the landlady took them in and kept them ; she had a distinct recollection of her good-looking lodger, who, like all poor, good-looking men, had been open-handed and liberal ; who had always had a cheery word for her, and had never forgotten to pat her little girl on the head when he passed her on the stairs. Mrs. Mines would have been glad enough if Dick had come back to her, especially, as she put it to herself, as her front parlour was so often empty, and she hailed the letters addressed to him as an indication of his own possible return ; but she looked out for him

in vain. Mr. Gaskell did not come down Laburnam Road, nor did he send for those letters ; so they lay altogether in a heap on Mrs. Mines' chimney-piece in her dingy, little, back-sitting room, till they were grimy with dust and dirt. Now and then, at rarer and rarer intervals, another was added to the pile, always in the same handwriting and always with the same post-mark; and then they ceased altogether, and Mrs. Mines tied them up with a piece of string, and put them religiously away in a corner of her store cupboard. "He'll come for them some day," she said to herself, but Dick had forgotten all about the address he had given to Avice, and the thought that she might have written to him gave him no trouble or uneasiness. She was out of sight and out of mind to him, and as the weeks went on, if he thought of her at all, it was only to congratulate himself upon having got out of a somewhat awkward predicament so very easily and comfortably.

And so it came to pass that, as he stood by himself in the long and sombrely furnished

drawing-room at Cambray Castle, waiting until Lady Harlowe should make some sign in answer to the note which he had sent in to her, no thought of Avice Colston and of his love episode upon the Devonshire coast added a feather-weight of confusion and trepidation to the many other doubts and anxieties which pressed somewhat thickly upon him.

For Dick had come riding up to Cambray Castle that day, after the hounds had gone home, with a very decided purpose in view.

He had come, as he put it to himself, to behave like a gentleman. Two years ago he had won an admission of love from Constance Harlowe's lips, and had been rejected with contumely because of his want of means; to-day he had come as a rich man, as a country gentleman of some position and standing, to renew his offer of marriage.

He had told himself that this was a thing which it behoved him to do, and to do quickly; that his honour as a gentleman demanded it of him, and that the sooner he put himself right with regard to Constance the better it

would be for himself and for her. Constance Harlowe had been the dream of his youth, the ideal of his manhood, almost, it may be said, the religion of his soul. He had believed her to be the type of everything that is pure and holy in womanhood, and he was quite certain that if he made her his wife he would be doing a wise and prudent thing, for Dick was fully aware of his own weaknesses; he was conscious of a certain amount of inconstancy within himself—of a tendency to be carried away by a fresh face, to be caught by a new fancy. Why, only this very day he had seen a woman, a girl whom he did not even know, and from whose eyes one laughing glance had somehow set all his pulses on fire. Was it not indeed time that he should *ranger* himself?

Dick had a very honest desire to settle down into the quiet and respectable life of a hunting country gentleman; he was fully alive to the responsibilities of his new position, and he had an earnest wish to fulfil them properly. He told himself that he wanted a wife to keep

him steady, and that having sown his wild oats it was time he began to reap a harvest of golden corn in the form of domestic peace and prosperity. That is what men mostly expect to do, what indeed they are bitterly indignant if they fail to do. They heap up the sins of their youth mountains high, and then one day they say to themselves, "Now I will wipe away all that, as if it had never been. I will turn over a new leaf and shut up the volume of my past. I will settle down and marry a good woman. I will lead a sober and virtuous life, going to church on Sundays, and putting on the whole garb of a God-fearing and upright man, and then, of course, the Almighty will bless me and reward me with prosperity as I deserve." My friend, you cannot turn your back upon your past in this fashion. This course of action, which you have planned so comfortably for yourself, is nothing but a refined form of utter selfishness. Have you forgotten that others have been implicated in your evil days?—that you have ruined other lives and wrecked the happiness of hearts that

have as good a right to God's blessings as you have? Do you think you will be allowed to wipe away all this, to shake off those who have suffered through you as if they had never existed, to turn your back upon your past and shut it out so that it will never trouble you again—to have sown wild oats and to reap golden grain? Ah, do not believe it! Our sins are not so easily obliterated and forgotten. Our past has a habit of getting up and slapping us in the face in an unexpected fashion. It may be that you are destined to learn repentance, and how to lead a new life, but you will have to be taught it, not in your own easy and comfortable fashion, not in the commonplace respectability of an agreeable life, such as you have mapped out for yourself, but in bitterness of heart and in the agony of remorse of a soul which, to repent truly, must first be brought low, and must learn to feel for others as well as for itself.

Dick Gaskell thought, that having become rich and prosperous, he had now nothing to do but to marry a good woman and forget his

past career, and live happily and peacefully ever after.

And the good woman of his dreams was of course Constance Harlowe.

Love is a magician. The thing we love is for the most part seen through a glamour of our own imaginations. What we love is not the tangible man or woman, as the case may be, who lives and breathes and exists, but the fancy of our own hearts, the ideal that we have built up out of our own unsatisfied longings.

Dick Gaskell had once loved Constance Harlowe deeply and sincerely. Two years of absence had surrounded her with a fanciful halo of perfection, to which she had in reality no claim whatever. He had loved other women since—madly, devotedly, for the time—and then he had tired of them because he had been satiated with their beauty, and because they had ended by oppressing and boring him. This one woman alone, because she had been denied to him, and because she was out of his reach, had seemed to be invested with a

something which other women had lacked. Surely, he told himself, she was the one sweet and holy woman whom he had ever met, and by whose means, could he win her, he should for ever purify and cleanse his own somewhat smirched and stain-flecked soul.

And so he waited in the long dreary room for the answer to his letter, with a tremor of anxiety, no doubt, by reason of the crisis of his life which was near at hand, but with no doubt, whatever, as to the nobility and justice of his cause.

Upstairs Lord and Lady Harlowe stood with Dick's open letter between them. It was easy to see, by their furrowed and deeply agitated faces, that there was no agreement between them on the subject of Dick's suit.

There was a battle royal going on over Constance's fate. Lady Harlowe was in favour of the old love who had come to the fore once more. Lord Harlowe was against him. It was the old battle of a clever and impetuous woman against a pig-headed and obstinate

man. The man in the end had the best of it. It was not for nothing that nature had bestowed upon Lord Harlowe that heavy nose and that long upper lip!

“There is absolutely nothing against him,” pleaded Lady Harlowe. “Two years ago, of course, the whole thing was preposterous; he was a pauper and he had no prospects, now it is totally different. Hollowcroft is a fine place; his position is good, his means are ample, his age is suitable, and I believe Constance likes him—what is there to object to?”

“You talk like a woman!” interrupted her lord angrily, for he had an innate conviction that manhood of itself confers a mental superiority over the weaker sex. “You say that there is nothing against this young man. How do you know that there is nothing against him? For two years we have lost sight of him. What has he been doing with himself? How do we know where he has been, whom he has associated with, what evil habits he may have contracted. Why, God bless my soul, he may be married for all we know!”

"That is mere childishness; would he come forward if that were the case?"

"There is no sort of scrape an idle young man about town won't get into. I do not want to sell my daughter, and—if he were in earnest——"

"Surely he must be in earnest if he wants to marry her."

"Then let him prove himself in earnest; let him live a decent and respectable life and take his place in the county. Let us ascertain what his private life is, and what are his politics."

"Bah! his politics," interrupted Lady Harlowe angrily.

"Yes, his politics, my lady!" echoed her lord, glaring at her; "do you think I'm going to give my daughter to a brawling seditious radical, who will give his vote against my nephew at the next election."

"You can easily inquire what his politics are," suggested Lady Harlowe.

"I'll do nothing of the sort, nothing of the sort. Constance had much better marry Fred."

“But Fred hasn’t asked her, and Mr. Gaskell has.”

“Tut, tut ; a woman must always have the last word ! Go to your daughter, my lady, and tell her I forbid her to engage herself to this young man until I’ve seen for myself how he is going to turn out. I will answer this letter myself. If he satisfies me, in a year’s time he may come forward again ; nothing, I am sure, can be more reasonable and lenient—he could hardly expect more—but I’ll have no engagement.”

So presently, whilst Dick was waiting in the long drawing-room, wondering how long he was to remain there, rehearsing what he was to say to his Constance, picturing to himself how she would look at him, how she would greet him, what sweet words perchance she might say to him, the door opened, and there entered, not his Constance at all, but his would-be father-in-law.



Chapter the Seventh.

DISILLUSION.

“Woman’s faith and woman’s trust,
Write the characters in dust.”

SIR WALTER SCOTT.





CHAPTER VII.

DISILLUSION.

"Woman's faith and woman's trust,
Write the characters in dust."

SIR WALTER SCOTT.

SINCE the days when the patriarch Jacob was constrained to wait for a term of seven years for the Rachel of his desires up to the present time, there was never a woman who has improved by that process ungallantly termed "keeping," nor has there ever existed a lover whose suit has not waxed colder and feebler by reason of delays, which in matters of the affections are often almost fatal in their results.

When Dick Gaskell had gathered from the ponderous and somewhat long-winded explanations of his beloved's father that there was to be actually no sort or manner of engage-

ment between Constance and himself for the space of one whole year, and that he was to undergo a species of probation during that period in order to prove himself to be worthy of her, it is not far short of the truth to say that his ardour underwent a damping which might be fitly compared to a cold shower-bath. His pride revolted against the doubts of his moral worth which such a course of action implied, whilst the warm flame of reviving love with which he had confidently come forward to claim the lady of his dreams dwindled away in the space of a very few minutes into a sickly and feeble glimmer. For by "no engagement" Lord Harlowe was careful to explain to him that a great strictness of demeanour was to exist between himself and Miss Harlowe. He was not to be permitted to declare his love to her, neither was he to write to her, nor ever to be in her society alone. He might "pay his addresses" to her, according to her father's old-fashioned phraseology, that is to say, he might converse with her in public, before her parents or

others, as freely as any other man; but until the year came round again he was to be put on his honour not to endeavour to ascertain the state of her feeling towards him.

Dick was so justly indignant at the severity displayed towards him that he had some difficulty in keeping his temper, and one or two hot words did, in fact, fall from his lips, which elicited a few dignified and deeply hurt expressions in reply. In the end, however, Lord Harlowe did consent to make one concession which Dick prayed for.

He was to see Constance alone, once—now, this very hour, and to tell her how it was that he was debarred from speaking to her more plainly. Lord Harlowe consented to this, and after appealing more than once to him concerning the “sacred honour of a gentleman,” which he was most especially to bear in mind during the interview, he shuffled off in quest of his daughter.

And then, when he had gone, Dick’s spirits rose again. Love, as he very well knew, laughs at the restrictions of stony-hearted

parents. It was all very well for Lord Harlowe to talk about "no engagement," and to declare that nothing of a personal or tender nature was to take place between himself and Constance, but how was Lord Harlowe or any other autocrat on earth to prevent the love-light that would surely leap into Constance's glad eyes at the sight of him? or the thrilling contact of hands that would surely cling to each other with a mutual grasp of love? or of lips that, face to face with each other, would be certain to meet once at least during that brief interview, in spite of fathers, and oaths, and all the paraphernalia of "honour" which the old gentleman had dangled with such alarming solemnity before him? It was next to impossible that Constance and he should meet without arriving at some sort of secret understanding. Love rides over everything else. Dick told himself that with a glad exultation.

And then the door opened and Constance herself entered.

Where was the glad joy which he had

expected? Where the outstretched hands, the hurried footstep, the eager delight in the happy face he had looked forward to greeting?

Miss Harlowe entered the room with a slow and lingering footstep, carefully closing the door behind her; her eyes were down-cast, her face was pale, her hands locked themselves together in an attitude of meek despondency. True, her heart was beating wildly and tumultuously, but of that he knew nothing; he only saw a thin, cold-featured woman, a little aged, a little faded, a little washed out from the Constance of his memory.

"Constance!" he said, making a couple of eager steps towards her.

She answered him not a word.

"Constance, dearest Constance, you love me still, do you not? You have not forgotten. Tell me that you love me!" and then he made as though he would have drawn her into his arms.

She shrank nervously away from him, turning pale and trembling.

“Oh, hush! you must not say that to me; you must not ask me those questions. I have promised——”

“What does it signify what you have promised. Why should any one stand between us?” he interrupted hotly, half angry, half triumphant. “Are not you and I together alone? Look at me, Constance, and tell me that you love me, that you will be my wife,” and this time he did succeed in getting his arm round her waist.

“Oh, no, no!” she cried, white to the lips, turning fearfully round. “Papa might be listening, he might indeed! and nothing is to be said; he told me you had promised that you would not speak a word—and mamma says——” and she paused.

“Well, and what does mamma say?” he said slowly, and somehow all the hot passion had died away out of his voice; it was cool and quiet enough now.

“It is so long ago, you know,” she stammered; “she and papa think you may not perhaps have thought much about me,

and where one's life's happiness is concerned it is better, is it not? to—to be quite sure. Oh, yes, they are quite right, and, oh! don't ask me, pray don't ask me—I daren't disobey them—indeed I daren't!" and tears of distress and confusion gathered in her eyes.

Dick's arm was no longer round her waist; he stood a little apart from her looking at her strangely, there was an odd sort of little smile that was almost a sneer upon his lips.

How different she was to what he had fancied her to be; what a poor craven-hearted creature! And, oh, yes! two years do make a difference in a woman's looks, no doubt! Now one came to look at her closely she was altered—a good deal altered—and then, the tears! They are never very becoming certainly, and whilst he thus stood regarding her attentively, almost critically, Constance put up her handkerchief and—oh, bathos!—blew her nose. Dick's eyes were magnetically fixed upon her; when she removed the handkerchief from her face, there could be no sort of doubt about it, her nose was red!

Dick experienced a revulsion of feeling—and then he pulled himself together with a guilty start.

He took a turn up and down the room, and once more he told himself that she was not in the very least what he expected—then he stopped before her, and his voice, when he spoke, was perfectly calm and collected.

“No doubt you are quite right, Miss Harlowe, and it will be better to conform entirely to the wishes of your excellent parents—of whose admirable judgment and discretion you have, deservedly, I am sure, so high an opinion.”

“Oh, yes, it will be much better,” she assented nervously and hurriedly. “I must obey papa, you know—I should never dare——”

“Exactly, you would never dare,” he repeated with an exasperating calmness which poor Constance herself was too agitated to notice, for she was struggling, poor girl, between her affection and her sense of duty, backed up by a whole armament of imaginary terrors.

"It will be better then that I should not speak to you again on this subject for a whole year; that, you say, is your *own* wish as well as your parents'?" He looked at her fixedly, she hesitated slightly; he was no longer the ardent lover who had tried to take her to his heart a few moments ago; but his vanity was wounded, a man's vanity generally suffers more keenly than his heart, for very pique's sake he was not minded to let her go altogether.

"It is *you* who wish for this delay, Constance?" he repeated more softly.

"It will be better, I am sure it will be better," she replied weakly, twisting her hands about nervously together and not daring to look at him. "And we shall meet very often, papa said; they will ask you here, and if in a year——"

"Yes, if in a year," he repeated softly; there was not a shadow of inflection in his voice as he said the words, not the veriest iota of a stress upon the little word "if," and yet, who can doubt that something at the very depths

of Dick Gaskell's inner consciousness did, in some measure, dwell for the fraction of a second upon that all comprehensive little preposition.

Then he gave a little quick breath, something between a sigh and a gasp of relief, and said quite airily and lightly :

“And as you said just now, it is a very long time ago ; two years seem a whole lifetime, somehow——” and lightning-like there flashed through his memory a vision of Avice Colston, with her bleached yellow hair and her blue eyes and tanned skin, of her bare brown legs gleaming in the shallow sea-water, and her soft brown arms that used to wind themselves so warmly and closely around his neck. Poor Avice ! she was only a fisherwoman, and of no account, of course, to Mr. Gaskell, of Hollowcroft ; but she at least had loved him in her rough wild way ; she at least was a true woman made of flesh and blood, not a cold piece of conventional propriety like Constance Harlowe, a poor, timid, frightened creature who could not stand up for herself, or own her love

if she had any. Why did she not refuse him altogether? he asked himself angrily. Ah! why, alas, did she not?

Poor Constance! For a second time the golden chance of life and love and happiness was held out to her, and for a second time she let it slip through her weak and nerveless fingers.

And now already the opportunity was over.

Enter Gog and Magog as of yore, magnificent in plush and white stockings and powdered hair, bearing between them the whole paraphernalia of afternoon tea, a massive silver tray, an antique teapot, cups of blue and gold crown Derby, and a carved-legged Chippendale table, upon which they proceeded to lay out a damask cloth of exceeding age and fineness. At the sight of these festive preparations Dick was for flight, and had already reached out his hand for his hat; but no such easy escape was to be his destiny, for the procession was closely followed up by Lady Harlowe herself.

There was a smile of welcome upon her lips,

and the two hands reached out to him grasped his in a greeting which was full of affectionate cordiality. For if Lord Harlowe had determined to throw cold water upon Dick Gaskell's suit, Lady Harlowe was equally determined that, whilst forced to obey her lord's mandate in the letter, it should not be her fault if Constance's lover did not persevere in his matrimonial intentions. Lord Harlowe might talk about his principles and his antecedents, but Lady Harlowe knew very well that Mr. Gaskell, of Hollowcroft, was a prize for which every mother with marriageable daughters would very soon be struggling, and she was by no means minded to let him slip. He did not probably know his value yet, poor young man, and what good luck it was to be so early in the field!

"My dear Mr. Gaskell!" she cried warmly, "it is indeed a pleasure to see you back amongst us once more! You may be sure your old friends all welcome you gladly, do we not, Constance, love? Oh! put down your hat. You cannot think of going yet, we have not

seen you for so long ; and I have ordered tea early for you on purpose. Constance, dear, give Mr. Gaskell some tea ; do you take sugar ? Ah, no doubt Constance remembers ! Young ladies have good memories for these little details."

Of course Constance did remember, and she busied herself amongst the teacups with a beating heart and burning cheeks. As to Dick, he was a good deal taken aback by the warmth of Lady Harlowe's reception of him—and a very uncomfortable impression took possession of him, as he, perforce, laid down his hat and resumed his seat—that in some fashion he was a captive—that he had lost his liberty, and that without enjoying any of the privileges of captivity. Very certainly he was not engaged to Miss Harlowe, and yet Lady Harlowe's appropriation of him seemed to imply that he was certainly no longer free to engage himself elsewhere. She went on with increasing cordiality and effusion :

"And now tell me all that you have

been doing at Hollowcroft. I hear that you are repapering the reception rooms? Not before it was needed, I am sure, for they were filthy; and you are doing great things in the stables, I am told, and building a conservatory on to the morning-room. We should like so much to see all the improvements. May Constance and I drive over some afternoon and have a look at them? Perhaps you will give us a cup of tea if you are at home?"

Dick murmured his delighted assent at this proposition as he took his cup of tea from Constance's hands.

"I am sure you are quite right to brighten up the old place a little," continued her ladyship, leaning back complacently in her chair. "Your poor cousin George, you know, never spent a penny on the place. And you must have a house-warming, Mr. Gaskell—oh, yes, you really must—and my nephew must give you a lawn meet—there always used to be a meet at Hollowcroft in your poor uncle's days. I will speak to

Fred about it at once—and you should fill the house, and have a dance at the same time—and, I was going to say, of course you will want some lady to manage everything for you, and do the honours—and I shall be most happy to be of service to you—you can't, of course, invite girls without some responsible lady there, and it will give me the greatest pleasure to manage all that for you."

"You are very kind," was all poor Dick could find to utter; his very house then was to be no longer his own! And then a sudden courage took him, for if Constance was a coward, Dick at least had no lack of hardihood. He gulped down a mouthful of hot tea, and then he took the bull by the horns and blurted out:

"I hope Lady Harlowe, as you are so kind, and take so much interest in me, that you will do me another good turn and persuade Lord Harlowe to give his consent to my engagement to Constance."

"Oh, now, really, you mustn't; you positively mustn't!" cried the old lady, flinging up her

hands in well-feigned dismay. "You really will have to keep your promises, my dear Mr. Gaskell! You must be very good and patient, and then, who knows what may happen—and as to Constance." She looked round, but Constance had flown, terror-stricken, from the room. "Oh, well, Constance is a good girl; you know Lord Harlowe won't hear of it, but a year soon passes, and, meanwhile, you may rely on me to make you feel yourself to be one of the family. We shall have you with us a great deal, you know. Hush! here comes Lord Harlowe; not a word to him, mind—and—very well, Mr. Gaskell, we will drive over and see all your improvements some afternoon next week. A cup of tea, my lord?"

And in this fashion Dick began to realize what was to be the anomaly of his position, and how great was to be the depth of his servitude. Nevertheless, it had not as yet entered into his mind that he desired to break off his relations altogether with Constance Harlowe.

Chapter the Eighth.

DICK GOES TO MISRULE.

“Come in the evening, or come in the morning,
Come when you’re looked for, or come without warning.”

“The Welcome,” T. O. DAVIS.





CHAPTER VIII.

DICK GOES TO MISRULE.

"Come in the evening, or come in the morning,
Come when you're looked for, or come without warning."

"The Welcome," T. O. DAVIS.

A DARK night, a howling wind, a drizzling rain, a lame horse, and the wrong side of the county. Can any combination of circumstances be more depressing?

For three miles or more it had been going on along a straight muddy lane—the man on foot, tired and hungry, wet to the skin, with his coat collar turned up in a vain endeavour to protect his ears from the wind and rain, splashing and floundering through invisible pools of water, the horse hobbling along slowly and laboriously on three legs. Not a house, not a cottage, not a hovel in sight to throw a gleam of light across the impenetrable darkness,

only the storm-racked sky and the faint dusky outline of the weary man and the flea-bitten grey stumbling along painfully, with an over-reach on his off fore foot.

And then, all at once, before the eyes of the belated sportsman, there flashed a long row of small, lighted windows to the right of the road—eight of them at least all in a line, and at some elevation apparently from the ground. Here, at last, was a human habitation of some kind! Visions of warm rooms, of dry clothes, of something hot and strong to drink, came swiftly and delightfully thronging upon his imagination. Be it cottage or be it castle, here at least was shelter for himself and rest for his animal. He quickened his flagging footsteps, whilst the grey horse seemed also to see and understand that some amelioration in his unhappy lot might be shortly expected, for he pricked his ears and tossed up his head with a whinny, which said as plainly as a horse can say, "Here we are—stables at last!"

Whether there was a road or not up to the

habitation for which he was making was a matter which Dick did not discover until a later date, for so fearful was he lest the enticing lights that seemed to promise so much relief to him should vanish phantasmagorically back into the hopeless blackness of the night, that, perceiving the dim outline of a white painted gate, he preferred to risk an evident short cut to the chances of losing altogether sight of that tempting line of windows. Thus, after floundering across a couple of fields bounded by miry ditches, dragging rather than leading his exhausted animal after him, he found himself at length in the brick-flagged yard of what was apparently a stable, with the strange little row of lighted windows looking down upon him from above.

Here the clatter of the grey's hoofs brought out a respectable-looking old man carrying a lantern.

"Come to grief, sir?" said this individual touching his forelock respectfully.

"My horse has. A bad over-reach, I fancy; anyway, he's dead lame; and I am

dead tired and have lost my way. Where the d— am I?"

Greyson was stooping down examining the damaged limb, which the grey horse confided to him with a touching resignation.

"Badish business," he muttered, more to himself than to the horse's owner; and without a word more he proceeded to lead away the hobbling animal into the dark recesses of the stables behind him.

"Hullo! where are you taking him?"

"I'll see to him, sir. He'll have to stop here to-night—can't get him any way fit to move till the morning."

"Well, but my man, what am I to do?" cried out Dick, seeing himself likely to be shut out by himself in the yard.

"Oh, they'll put you up in the house, sir—you'll find the door at the end. I'll see to the horse all right."

The door was then actually shut upon him, and Dick found himself left alone. It was evident that a man, in comparison with a horse,

was but of very small importance in the eyes of that ancient groom.

Seeing that nothing further was to be expected from this quarter, Mr. Gaskell began to look about for the door which had been indefinitely alluded to. To find it, however, was easier said than done. He fumbled along in the darkness, in the direction which a jerk of the groom's thumb had seemed to indicate. It appeared to him that he was in a gentleman's stable-yard, and that, probably, it would be from the coachman's family that he was to ask for hospitality. He wondered vaguely whose stables they were, and how far off was the house of their owner. He knew that he must be quite on the further side of the county from his own house, the hounds having left off a very long way from Hollowcroft, and he did not think he remembered anybody of any importance whom he knew so far from his own part of the world. Nevertheless, under the circumstances, he would have been grateful for a barn, and the snug quarters of a gentleman's coachman, with no doubt a

clean ~~and~~ pleasant-spoken wife to minister to his necessities, was a piece of good fortune by no means to be despised.

Whilst reflecting thus, he found himself before a narrow doorway of unpretentious aspect, ornamented by a horseshoe mounted as a door knocker. Upon this he played vigorously, and then stood and waited, turning his back upon the driving rain, which seemed to increase every moment in intensity. A small terrier came and sniffed inquiringly at his heels, wriggling his wet, white body and wagging his stumpy tail in a friendly and amicable manner, which seemed to imply hospitable things; but there came no answer to his rap, neither could he discover any vestige of a bell. He therefore knocked again, and, after a brief pause, once again. He now began to wax impatient and angry, and encouraged by the sympathizing whine of the terrier, who was evidently as anxious to get in as himself, he turned the handle of the door, and finding that it was not locked, he entered a narrow and perfectly dark passage.

Once inside, he became immediately aware of a great uproar which seemed to be raging exactly overhead, and which doubtless was the reason that his frequent knockings had remained unheard.

There was a trundling as of barrels being rolled about the floor, a violent thumping as though of heavy objects being flung against the walls, a yelling as though of a legion of fiends let loose; and above all else, a sharp maddened screech, uttered every half-second by a throat which was evidently canine and not human.

All this horrible and mysterious clamour did not seem to disturb the little wet fox terrier, who had run in behind him, in the very slightest—he was probably used to it—he wagged his tail encouragingly against Dick's legs, as though to say, "You trust to me and, don't be alarmed," and pattered on straight up a narrow ladder-like staircase which rose almost immediately out of the passage, and at the top of which Dick, now that his eyes began to be accustomed to the light, perceived

a dim gleam as from a lamp through the crannies of some heavy *portière* curtains.

As it seemed as if he must either find his own way up or remain where he was, Dick mounted the staircase in the wake of his canine guide.

He found himself in a long, warmly-carpeted passage, lit by hanging coloured-glass lamps at intervals, and ornamented by large red and yellow pots containing palms and ferns. The walls were profusely covered with coloured sporting prints, tastefully surrounded by groups of whips, bits and spurs, whilst upon the top of a long row of doors, which were all upon one side, was either a fox's head, pad, or brush, or else horseshoes arranged in geometrical patterns.

The "coachman's wife" must be a lady of refined taste! Dick began to feel exceedingly curious to discover what sort of persons inhabited this singular dwelling. Meanwhile, the hubbub raged wilder than ever, and seemed to come out of one particular room, to the door of which the little fox terrier

directed himself with unerring precision, sitting up outside on the mat and scratching against it with two rapid and impatient little paws, much in the same way as he no doubt was accustomed to scratch into rabbit-holes. No notice was taken of this modest canine device by reason of the commotion which was going on within. "Pandemonium let loose!" muttered Dick to himself, as he, too, knocked in a human fashion upon the door panels.

For all answer he heard a chorus of voices, all apparently shouting together:

"Catch hold of him, Charlie!"

"Get him by the tail, Tom!"

"Where are the tongs? they'll fetch him out."

And then came "Yap! ya ap, ya-a—ap!" in an agonized crescendo that ended in a perfect scream.

Then a female voice in a wild howl:

"Little Tom, you are a *fiend*! If you don't let go, I'll never speak to one of you again; never, never—for goodness sake take care of the lamp, it was all but over! Let go this moment, every one of you, or I swear I'll

leave you for ever, and go straight out of the house and marry the very first man I meet outside the door!"

And then and there the door opened, and Dick Gaskell, mud-splattered from head to foot, wet as a rag, with his coat-collar turned up and his white hunting tie reduced to a mere damp wisp, but with eyes dancing with fun, and his handsome face all aglow with amusement, stood in the doorway before the eyes of the astonished family group.

The scene that met his eyes beggars description! The furniture was dragged about all over the room—books, papers, cigar-cases were strewn about the floor, the lamp stood on the ground, the sofa was perched up on end, and all the armchairs were on their heads. In the middle of the room was a high, square cupboard-like piece of furniture of solid mahogany, which, from the rattling and chinking which went on within it, was probably full of tumblers and soda-water bottles. This, too, like everything else, had been dragged out from its

accustomed place against the wall, and on the top of it stood a girl in a white dress, hugging in her arms a struggling and kicking black poodle, whose possession was evidently the cause of the commotion, for round and round, below the girl and the dog, careered three wild red-headed boys in pink coats, armed, one with the tongs, another with a piece of rope, another with a stick, each and all of them endeavouring to tear Balzac from his temporary refuge in Eve's arms.

This is a faithful picture of the home life of the young Latimers.

Dick thought he had never in his life seen so sweet an image of confusion and distress as was Eve's lovely face when she caught sight of him in the doorway.

But for Eve herself it was terrible; she recognized Mr. Gaskell at a glance, although the few brief words they had once exchanged in the hunting-field was the only sort of introduction that had ever passed between them, and she was well aware that he must

have overheard her last mad words. A burning blush covered her face from brow to chin as she realized this.

At a glance, too, Eve perceived that Mr. Gaskell had come to ask for hospitality at "Misrule," and that it behoved her to receive him in a gracious and dignified manner. But how play the hostess discreetly and with due propriety when one is perched up on a high and tottering elevation from which one cannot descend unaided? As to her brothers, they were, of course, of no manner of use to her. In the small embarrassments of life men never are of service; they have none of the ready tact that renders a woman the mistress of a difficult situation, nor are they often inclined to proffer assistance until the climax of the dilemma is at an end. To do the young Latimers justice, however, it must be said that they were physically incapable of coming to Eve's rescue—the fun of her utter confusion was more than it was in their natures to struggle against—and they straightway collapsed into different corners in such convulsions of

merriment, that it would have been vain to expect anything like sobriety or propriety of demeanour from any of them. They were rendered speechless with laughter. Little Tom, indeed, fell all of a heap at the foot of Eve's pedestal, and any one unused to his habits might easily have supposed that he was about to have a seizure of some serious and dangerous nature, so helpless were his writhings and chokings, and so desperate appeared to be his struggles.

It was left to Eve to stammer forth a sort of greeting to the intruder.

"Oh, Mr. Gaskell, we did not hear you come in; did nobody open the door for you? I ought to introduce my brothers, if only they would stop laughing—you have lost your way, I am sure; and have you had any dinner?—and—oh, how *can* I go on talking perched up here! For goodness sake, some of you horrid boys give me a hand that I may jump down."

"Let me help you down, Miss Latimer," said Dick, laughingly coming forward. Eve

gave one wild indignant glance round at her brothers, and then seeing that nothing in the shape of help was likely to come to her from them, she allowed Balzac to struggle out of her arms, and resigned her white hands somewhat unwillingly into Dick's.

It was a considerably high jump. Eve had to make an undignified spring forwards. Dick somehow did not stand quite far enough away, or, perhaps, it was those up-turned steel-grey eyes that burnt with undisguised admiration as they looked up at her that had the effect of bewildering and confusing her. It is difficult, in short, to say how it happened or which was to blame, but there is no doubt that as Miss Latimer jumped she alighted, not decorously upon the floor, but very flounderingly straight into Mr. Gaskell's out-reached arms, which there-upon held her prisoner for one half-second longer than was perhaps strictly necessary, whilst, as her head came into contact with a very wet shoulder, he murmured tenderly, "I hope I have not hurt you?"

She was six yards away from him in an instant, whilst up arose those three jealous young guardians as one man, all as grave as judges and twice as severe, their laughter sobered away in the twinkling of an eye as though by magic. For how dare mortal man catch their own immortal Eve, even accidentally, in so audacious a manner? Does a woman ever have so strict a censor, so suspicious a watch-dog as her own brother! He has the eyes of a lynx where she is concerned, his pride is in arms at a look, his fears spring up fiercely at a word; and he has, moreover, because he is of her own flesh and blood, that which her husband will never have—an innate consciousness of her nature, and of the sort of persons that are likely to have an influence over her, that almost amounts to clairvoyance. No fairy princess, shut up in a turreted tower and guarded by fierce and fiery dragons, was ever so well protected from the eyes of men as was our little Eve Latimer, surrounded by those three graceless young brothers. She might say or do any-

thing she pleased she might go where she liked—be what she liked—for was she not a queen? But then in her very queenliness lay her sanctity—and were a man so much as to lay a finger upon the hem of her robe, then all at once they were ready, every one of them, to start up and accuse the rash offender of a crime which seemed to them to be little less than a sacrilege. And every one had seen with his own eyes how Eve had come stumbling down from her pedestal into Dick Gaskell's arms, and how he, impious man, had held the sweet burden that had fallen into them with a grasp that had lingered too tenderly to be absolutely free from intention. What they had not seen or known was the sudden beating of Eve's heart, and that strange little tingling of all her pulses that had sent her flying away from him in a sweet and troublous confusion.

All of a sudden Gerald became the host and master of the house, and was proffering the hospitalities of Misrule upon the new comer with a grave politeness that was almost

ludicrous from its contrast with the late uproarious hilarity, whilst Charlie rang the bell and ordered a room and a bath, and little Tom, slipping his arm within Eve's, said to him with a touch of conscious severity :

“ You must not think, Mr. Gaskell, that our family romps are always of quite so noisy a nature, and we always put an end to them and behave decorously at once when any of our acquaintances are good enough to look in upon us.”

“ Indeed ! ” said Dick quickly, with a smile over the tinge of defiance in the solemn civility of these three young boys. “ It is I who must apologize for having disturbed Miss Latimer and yourselves in your—in your sports. I would only ask for a biscuit and a glass of sherry, and if you could kindly send somebody to get me a fly from Truxworth, I shall be able to drive home all right—as my horse is dead lame.”

But here the Latimer nature reasserted itself, and the boys, won, perhaps, by Dick's pleasant voice and smile, were themselves again.

"A fly indeed! as if we were going to allow that!" cried Tom hotly.

"It's not likely we are going to let a guest leave the house again on such a night!" said Gerald.

"Or to send you away unfed and wringing wet as you are," echoed Charlie.

Whilst Eve smiled at him, having recovered her composure, and said gaily, "I have rung already; your room will be prepared, and you shall have some dinner very soon—and I am sure you needn't apologize for disturbing us, Mr. Gaskell. I, for one, am deeply grateful to you for releasing me. Do you know that they wanted to hang my poor poodle by a rope, tied to his tail, out of the window? Did you ever hear of any atrocity, Bulgarian or British, to equal *that*?"

"Well, you know, Eve, you *would* boast about his being so thoroughbred, that he could be held up anywhere and anyhow."

"Little cur; he has bolted!" said Charlie, looking about the room for Balzac, who had

thankfully and swiftly absconded through the half-open door.

“But for the dogs I should be out in the cold still!” laughed Dick, with a double meaning that was not lost upon Eve, and then he told how Viper had led him upstairs and had guided him to the smoking-room door; and he fell into such raptures over Viper’s breed, build, ears and general “varminty-ness,” that little Tom’s heart that only owned two vulnerable points—Eve and Viper—was completely won.

And so, although the town of Truxworth was only two miles away, and although its flys were numerous and clean and swift, and were only too glad of a job that would have taken Mr. Gaskell back to Hollowcroft in three-quarters of an hour from door to door—yet so it came to pass that as the young Latimers were gradually thawed into the conviction that he had no burning desire to insult (*i.e.*, make love to Eve), and as he himself was loth to go, and as Eve smiled and whispered “don’t go,” so it was that Dick

Gaskell yielded to one of those combinations of things that may assuredly be termed "fate," and stayed that night at Misrule Lodge.



Chapter the Ninth.

“LOVE WILL FIND OUT THE WAY.”

“For human hearts are all too weak to hold thee,
And how, O love, shall human hearts enfold thee?
There is a seal of sorrow on thy brow,
There is a deadly fire in thy breath.
With life thou lurest, yet thou givest death.
O leave the wretched race of men
Whose days are but the dying season's span,
Vex not his painful life;
Make thy immortal sport—in heaven's high court
And cope with gods that are of equal power.”
“Clytemnestra,” OWEN MEREDITH.





CHAPTER IX.

“LOVE WILL FIND OUT THE WAY.”

“For human hearts are all too weak to hold thee,
And how, O love, shall human hearts enfold thee ?
There is a seal of sorrow on thy brow,
There is a deadly fire in thy breath.
With life thou lurest, yet thou givest death.
O leave the wretched race of men
Whose days are but the dying season’s span,
Vex not his painful life ;
Make thy immortal sport—in heaven’s high court
And cope with gods that are of equal power.”

“Clytemnestra,” OWEN MEREDITH.

IF it had been but a small pretext of necessity that had kept Dick Gaskell at the young Latimers’ house the night before, there was very decidedly no reason at all why he should have stayed on there through the whole of the following day. The question, however, decided itself in the most natural way in the

world—it was raining in torrents—the boys came into the breakfast-room very late, and with but scarcely time to bolt down hot coffee and mutton chops, for the meet was far away, and their horses were waiting below ready saddled in their boxes—Eve, too, was late; she had been helping her brothers as usual. Dick was by the window when she entered dressed, not in his hunting gear, but in a shooting suit of Charlie's. When he saw Eve in her habit he made up his mind that he could not let her go away and leave him alone—the weather gave him a pretext for interfering.

“You are never going to allow your sister to go out on such a day,” he observed casually to Gerald as they took their places round the table. Gerald, whose mouth was full of buttered toast, gave a rapid glance at the streaming window panes, and at the mist-blurred landscape without.

“It does look rather beastly; are you really going Eve?”

“I suppose so, weather doesn't generally stop me,” she answered rather absently.

"Have I given you enough sugar, Mr. Gaskell?"

She was standing up behind the cups and saucers; the window was behind her, the outlines of her graceful figure in her perfectly-fitting habit stood out clearly against the grey light, there was a *soupeçon* of something less "keen" than usual in her answer, a shadow of dubiousness in the tone of her voice; brothers do not notice these intangible details, but lovers do.

"It is not fit for a lady to be out such a day as this; you ought not to allow Miss Latimer to go," said Dick very decidedly, looking at Charlie this time. Charlie prided himself upon being the sensible one of the family.

"Upon my soul, I think you are right; you'll only get wet to the skin, and it's an awful way off; you'd really better not go, Eve."

"Do you think so?" Eve's eyes were on her plate, the subject seemed uninteresting to her.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Gaskell?" suddenly asked Tom, for little Tom was very

wide-awake indeed, and Eve was his divinity.

Dick, who had been prepared for this question, was quite ready with his answer.

"I? Oh I must get home, with your kind permission, Latimer," turning to Gerald; "I'll leave my quad here till I can send over a man for him, and I'll walk into Truxworth and make my way back from there."

"Liberty Hall, or rather stables, do as you like Gaskell. Now then, boys, are you coming? We must be off. Are you going or not, Eve? I do think it's almost too bad for you."

Eve had quietly flung her gloves and whip upon a side-table; she unfastened her hat as she answered:

"I'll stay at home then to-day."

Then they all went down, and Dick with them, into the stables below.

Eve stood at the window watching whilst the horses were brought out and her brothers mounted. She was angry with herself.

"What can be the matter with me," she asked herself irritably. "I've never felt like

this before, never! When was I ever known to give up a day's hunting for a little rain? Bah! it's contemptible. Can I be so poor-spirited a creature as to give in just because a man who is almost a stranger to me says I'd better stop at home; what can there be about him; will he go directly, I wonder."

She watched her boys ride away down the drive; they all turned back and waved their hands to her, and she, too, nodded and kissed her hand back at them, but she felt guilty, like a traitor, for was she not glad, yes, actually *glad*; she, a sportswoman, to whom hunting was the chief good on earth, she was *glad* to see them go without her!

"When are you going to send me away, Miss Latimer?" said Dick behind her; he had come quietly upstairs again.

"Send you away, Mr. Gaskell?"

"Yes—am I to go at once; or—or may I stay a little longer?"

Eve smiled a little. "I believe you would like to stay and lunch with me, Mr. Gaskell," she said demurely.

"I believe I should, Miss Latimer," he replied also very sedately.

After that they spent the morning together. She took him, of course, into the stables and showed him her horses, her favourite chestnut Sunbeam, and the little bay thoroughbred Charlie had got for her from Ireland, and the brown horse she was not quite sure she liked because he pulled so at his fences and tired her so much in a long day. It was all very interesting to Dick ; in fact, no horses had ever interested him so much in all his life before as these three animals, whose divine felicity it was to carry Miss Latimer to hounds. Eve stood there discoursing in the loose boxes, Balzac at her heels, the white terriers, parents and puppies, tumbling about in the straw. When she leant her bare head fondly against Sunbeam's coat, Dick wondered which auburn red was the loveliest ; when her small white hand held chopped carrots under her favourite's nose, he envied the bliss of the animal whose privilege it was to eat out of so exquisite a dish ; when she stooped down to dilate on the cleanness of

hocks or fetlocks, or when she laid her lips for a moment against the satin necks of her equine darlings, Dick would have given his soul to have been converted for ten minutes into a horse so blessed and so fondled. They made up a pretty picture altogether, the sleek thoroughbred chesnut mare and the gold-haired, bronze-eyed maiden, the dogs among the yellow straw, and the tall handsome young man looking on with admiring eyes.

Assuredly those eager eyes that drank in every detail of Eve's beauty and grace with so much ardour saw no disturbing visions of that other maiden with the cold, regular features and the pale, faded cheek to whom his faith and his honour were bound. No memories of the Constance, for whose hand he had but little more than a fortnight ago made so humble a petition, troubled Dick's mind at this moment, when Eve's lovely eyes looked up half-shyly, half-saucily into his, and when her white hand, half by accident, half, it is to be feared, by intent and purpose, came for a moment in contact with his own. Oh, happy

bewildering hours of love's first golden joy ! Can anything in life give us back that half-veiled glimpse of a glorious paradise that seems ever just beyond our reach, of a bliss that we snatch at half fearfully, half greedily, scarcely able to realize—poor earth-bound grovellers as we are—that such a maddening joy is destined to be held within our very grasp. So much has been said, so much has been written concerning love—so often it has been reviled and degraded, so often the after bitterness has seemed to obscure the past delight—that it may be well doubted whether it is not regarded in the light of a curse rather than a benefit to a humanity whose very weakness renders it unfit to cope wisely with a passion that is so absorbing and, at times, so fatal. It is a passion, as has been said, with which men are too weak and too powerless to grapple ; and yet, can we doubt that love is the one God-given thing which Heaven has left unto earth ! the one divine spark of immortal flame which the sordid cares of a commonplace world have well nigh

extinguished. In this nineteenth century of ours, all that is tender and true, is too often hidden away, buried under mountains of what is base and unworthy. Too often the love of money and the greed of avarice reign supreme, and all that is most noble and spiritual in man's nature has been quenched in a mean and unlovely materialism, and to counteract all this—Love only—is left to us!

To Eve Latimer, Love, looking through Dick Gaskell's handsome eyes, had suddenly come to-day. Something that was stranger and sweeter than her devotion to her young brothers, more absorbing than her passion for horse or dog, suddenly flooded her being with a bewildering sense of wondering delight. She was too inexperienced, too utterly unversed in such matters to give this new feeling a name, or to realize what it might possibly mean to her, only she wished that this wonderful morning might have lasted for ever; that she and Dick might stand eternally thus alone together, with no other eyes save those of the horses and the dogs to spy upon their content.

As to Dick, he understood better than she did, and knew that his fate was come; a fate far other than had been his careless passion for such as Avice Colston, or the calm deliberation of his desire to straighten his life by a union with Constance Harlowe. Here was something that set his heart beating and his pulses quickening! a woman gloriously beautiful, deliciously graceful, entrancingly tempting—what wonder that Dick, whose conscience was always easy and elastic, and whose disregard of ulterior consequences might be compared to the midsummer grasshopper of La Fontaine's fable, and whose distaste for disturbing memories made him shut up sundry passages of his career as a man shuts up his unpaid bills in the drawers of an unused bureau, what wonder that he flung duty and honour and prudence to the four winds of heaven, and yielded himself recklessly to the enchantment of the hour.

Even the weather played into his hands, for when they left the loose boxes at last and came out into the yard, the rain had ceased,

and the sun was shining out stormily upon the wet world from behind a bank of black clouds that were hurrying away eastwards.

"That is capital!" cried Eve gaily. "Now I shall drive you into Truxworth after lunch in the pony-cart; you will see how fast that fat little Tommy—he is called after Tom, you know—can go."

"Too fast, I fear!" sighed Dick, looking sentimental.

"You are not perhaps in a hurry," ventured Eve after a moment's hesitation; "then, if there is time, I might drive you round by Chillingby; it is rather a flat road, but it makes a change going that way; it is longer, you know—and there is a model farm," she added weakly, "at Chillingby."

"The very thing of all others I should like to see!" cried Dick with animation, and then he vowed that model farms in general were the chief objects of his desires, and that the particular model farm at Chillingby, although in truth he had never before heard of its exist-

ence, was the one which he most intently longed to behold.

And so they lunched. The fare was simple enough. Dick, who had a French cook at Hollowcroft, and had grown somewhat dainty in his tastes since he had become a rich man, was accustomed to a great many courses, and to luncheons of an elaborate nature ; yet so piquant is Love's sauce, and so potent are the fumes with which he flavours his Elysian draughts, that no *salmi aux truffes* ever seemed to him so delicious as the wing of cold chicken carved for him by Eve's white hands, and no "74" Perrier Jouet so invigorating as the light claret which she poured out herself into his glass, standing close behind him the while, so close indeed, that a man would be less, or more than mortal were he to refrain from touching those ministering fingers for one blissful moment with his own. There was nothing, indeed, in that simple repast that did not seem to him to be of more superlative excellence than a regal banquet.

Eve, on her part, shared her simple luncheon

with Mr. Gaskell, of Hollowcroft, with a serene unconsciousness that there was anything left to be desired about it. Afterwards, when she had made a close acquaintance with Hollowcroft in all its grandeur, a sense of shame and confusion did overpower her at the recollection of her cold chicken and light claret; but at the time no such false sentiment troubled her. Dick asked for a second help, and between them the chicken—which was home-grown and small and bony, as country home-grown chickens are wont to be—was made to look a very much wrecked little skeleton.

Then when another blissful hour-and-a-half had somehow vanished away, the wheels of the village cart rattled upon the stones below, and Tommy, the little dun pony, was heard backing his way most reluctantly between the shafts, and then Eve put on her hat and jacket, and the two started away *en route* to Truxworth, *via* the Chillingby model farm.

Now, by what evil chance was it that the fox, which by every law of wind and scent

and custom should have run that day in a northerly direction, so leaving Misrule and Truxworth far to the west of him, should by some perversity of vulpine intellect have struck southwards out of the Gossiter Woods, then off westwards along Timberton Bottom, over the Wander Brook, and so in a direct line to within a very few miles of Truxworth itself. As the little pony-cart wended its very deliberate way along the Chillingby lane, which was, as Eve had described it to be, flat and bare, bounded with ploughed fields, and enlivened by neither fine timber nor clustering villages, of a sudden Tommy pricked up his ears, and Eve uttered a cry and pulled him up sharply, for afar off was heard the voices of men, the trampling of galloping horses, and the rush of the hounds; and presently, through a break in the grey line of a spinny to the right, there came in sight of the two eager spectators a small swift, reddish object flying across the field straight towards them. To jump out of the cart, to back it rapidly away to a gate to

the left, was the work of a moment, and then the whole field came into view: the hounds in a white sheet running closely and steadily, then red coats and black popping one after the other over the distant fence—six of them close together, Tom Latimer, on his bay horse with a white blaze and white forefeet, being plainly to be seen ahead of all others. The fox passed within a few yards of where Dick and Eve stood holding the excited little pony by the head between them, then came the whole pageant—hounds, horses, and men over the fence into the road, and off again the other side across the further field, and then away out of sight over the further hedge.

Eve was trembling with excitement; she sprang into the cart.

"Come on, jump in!" she cried out to Dick; "we shall see them again at Chillingby cross roads if we are quick—make haste, Mr. Gaskell, let us see how fast Tommy can get along. Oh, what a piece of luck!"

Dick did not see any luck about it at

all. He obeyed her in silence, however, and Eve whipped the dun pony into a gallop.

Dick could not utter a word. It was scarcely possible that in the rapid transit of those galloping men the little group by the roadside had been suffered to remain totally unnoticed. Could anything be more unfortunate? Oh, yes, for here came worse confusion and misfortune still in the shape of a couple of stragglers, who came cantering down the Chillingby road towards them. Eve, unconscious of harm, was delighted.

"Here are some more!" she cried excitedly. "Going the wrong way, too," and she waved her whip wildly to the right to indicate the way which the hounds had gone.

The riders were a man and a lady. The lady was Mrs. Clitheroe, splashed with mud from head to foot, the man, Gerald Latimer. Both were talking earnestly. Suddenly they caught sight of the village cart and its occupants. To his dying day Dick never forgot the mingled surprise and bewilderment and then the amusement which overspread

pretty Mrs. Clitheroe's expressive face at the sight of him. It made his heart sink down with a thud—down into his very boots.

"Hallo!" cried out the fair equestrian. "Good gracious! *here* is Mr. Gaskell after all—and by all that is wonderful, *Miss Latimer* with him! Well, of all the extraordinary combinations! Oh, you truant!" shaking her whip playfully at him. "There has been a hue and cry after you, I can tell you, and weeping and gnashing of teeth in high quarters—you will catch it, sir! A pretty way to treat a certain person, who shall be nameless—I wouldn't be in *your* shoes, Miss Latimer! It has been a nice day after all, you see, and you needn't have been afraid of the rain—but perhaps it wasn't the rain—other attractions, eh? That way, did you say, the hounds went? Oh, we shall never catch them up! Come along, Gerald, give me a lead over this fence, please. Ta-ta! you very naughty young people." And with more playful nods and smiles Mrs. Clitheroe and her escort vanished into the adjoining field.

"What does she mean?" murmured Eve bewildered, turning round to look at her companion. Dick's brow was as black as thunder.

"Impertinent little fool! how can I tell what she meant? Why can't people mind their own business!" he muttered angrily, and then he lapsed again into a gloomy silence.

Too late; he now recollected that Lady Harlowe had volunteered herself and her husband and her daughter to lunch at Hollowcroft to-day, after their usual drive to the meet; too well did he perceive that inquiries must have been made after him, his absence remarked and commented upon, and the lunch which her ladyship had counted upon must have either collapsed altogether, or have been, by his conspicuous absence, a dismal commentary upon his remissness and want of proper attention to the family of the lady to whose hand he aspired. Did he aspire to it? Dick was in more doubt than ever upon this point. Almost he wished that he might have offended

Lady Harlowe past forgiveness, and that as Mrs. Clitheroe had found out the reason of his dereliction from his duty, she would so magnify his crime that Cambray Castle might perchance repudiate him altogether and for ever—for that Mrs. Clitheroe would so publish and magnify his sin he had no doubt.

After that, all the brightness had gone out of the day; all the sweetness had been turned into sourness for them both. Dick requested Eve to drive him by the shortest and quickest route into Truxworth, and gave her to understand that his views upon model farms had miraculously undergone a certain amount of modification. Eve turned Tommy's head silently down a narrow lane by which her projected drive could be shortened by two miles.

After they had gone some way along it in silence, Eve remarked suddenly :

"I don't like that Mrs. Clitheroe."

"Who does?"

"Gerald does," replied Eve quickly.

"Why does she call *me* 'Miss Latimer' and

my brother 'Gerald?' That is what I don't understand!"

It was what a good many people professed not to understand.



Chapter the Tenth.

LUCY CLITHEROE.

“ So she sits in the curtained, luxurious light
Of that room with its porcelain, and pictures and flowers.
All without is so cold—
All within is so bright and so warm.”

OWEN MEREDITH.





CHAPTER X.

LUCY CLITHEROE.

"So she sits in the curtained, luxurious light
Of that room with its porcelain, and pictures and flowers.
All without is so cold—
All within is so bright and so warm."

OWEN MEREDITH.

MRS. CLITHEROE was a woman of whom it was commonly said amongst her acquaintances that there was "no harm in her."

Of the precise meaning of this negative and somewhat apologetic commendation it is perhaps difficult to give a clear definition. It is astonishing to what a large proportion of persons—chiefly women—the same enigmatical phrase is applied. There is "no harm in them!" It is a sentence that is frequently upon the lips of most people concerning some one or other of their friends. The question that most naturally occurs to

one is whether, on the other hand, there is any good in them ?

As applied to little Mrs. Clitheroe, it might no doubt be taken to mean that she was at all events innocent of any flagrant crimes against morality and respectability.

She had no vicious tendencies ; she neither smoked, nor swore, nor drank ; she did not ill-treat her children, neither did she neglect her husband ; on the contrary, she submitted to a certain amount of neglect on his part with a very pretty and touching air of submission and sweet temper.

Mr. Clitheroe, in fact, was frequently away from his wife ; business, he allowed it to be inferred, took him very often up to town, sometimes for two or three days, or weeks, as the case might be, together, and his Lucy sighed over the "business" in a truly pathetic and sorrowful fashion. During his absence she led a perfectly tranquil and decorous existence, going out but little into society, asking nobody to dinner when her lord was not there to do the honours of his

own table, and congratulating herself loudly, with much outward show of satisfaction, upon the comfort and protection she derived from the presence of her little girls' governess, who was invariably to be found sitting silently in a far corner of the pretty drawing-room by any stray visitors who might drop in accidentally either to luncheon or to tea.

As to her amusements, Lucy Clitheroe rode to hounds, of course, because to live in South Meadowshire and not to hunt would be like living in Rome and never to have been to the Colosseum ; but her hunting was of a perfectly decorous, or, as she would have said, of a "ladylike" nature. Two days a week she rode to hounds cautiously and safely, keeping to roads and gateways as much as it was possible to do, and selecting the gaps in such fences as she was perforce compelled to surmount. On other days she drove her ponies to the meet, and followed the hounds on wheels as far as it was possible to do so, and this she almost preferred to riding, because she was at heart extremely timid, and that

her object in hunting at all was not so much the chase of the fox as that of a far finer animal called Man, which she was never tired of pursuing. When she appeared at the meet in her low phaeton, these creatures swarmed round her in a way that was quite delightful to her ; they mobbed her till she was often completely hidden behind a very armament of black and red coats ; and because she understood her game to perfection, she baited her pony-carriage in a manner which was quite irresistible. For whenever there was a check in the sport, and wherever Mrs. Clitheroe's little vehicle could be seen in a neighbouring lane, there, straightway, hurried all the horsemen, young and old, like flies around a sweetshop ; for Mrs. Clitheroe carried a basket with her, packed with cunningly concocted sandwiches, toast and pounded chicken, *pâté de foie gras*, and other savoury compounds, all done up in neat little packages, just the right size to fit into breast-coat pockets ; and there were also various sorts of beverages, dealt out by her fair fingers in

tiny silver cups. Cherry brandy and orange gin and ginger cordials, such as restored warmth and good temper to many a cross and shivering sportsman, to whom the evils of being kept pottering at a covert side were thus beneficially mitigated by this delightful little woman. Assuredly Mrs. Clitheroe understood the right way to the masculine heart !

And then she was so merry and so good natured ! Her little chatter, if somewhat silly and self-conscious was, at the same time, so harmless and so amusing, that if now and then she related a little tale of scandal, or spread abroad an incident that might make mischief amongst her friends, she did it all so innocently and so smilingly, that it would have been hard to have imputed any malicious purpose to her. Her friends listened to her, laughed with her, ate her sandwiches, and drank her cordial drinks, and were glad to take her at her own valuation, and to swear that there was "no harm in her."

So, too, they were lenient to her in other matters. When she called all her men friends by their christian names, and allowed herself to be pretty generally addressed by them as "Lucy," the world said it was only "her way." When Gerald Latimer began to be seen pretty constantly by her side in the hunting-field, and was even known to lose his place in the run of the season in order to potter about the roads at her elbow, it was charitably set down to his own folly and to her good nature. For who could breathe an injurious word against a woman who was ever so virtuously indignant over the small frailties of her fellow-women? one, too, who was for ever bewailing the frequent absences of a beloved husband, and whose home life, moreover, was always sanctified by the silent witness to the absolute propriety of her existence—the children's governess.

Oh, no! there was certainly no harm in Lucy Clitheroe!

In person she was small and *mignonne*, with tiny hands and feet and a little wisp of

a figure that gave her a very girlish aspect, and rendered the fact of her tall, twelve-year-old daughter a marvellous and unexpected revelation. Elsewhere I have called her pretty, but in truth she had no actual claims to beauty, only a crown of fair, fluffy hair—a *tête de mouton*, as our neighbours over the water call it—a wide mouth, and a nose that transgressed against every canon of symmetry and grace upon which a nose should be formed. And yet, with it all, there was a piquancy which went perhaps farther than actual beauty, and Lucy Clitheroe had never lacked admirers. Ever since she had been fifteen men had been attracted by her brightness and vivacity, and by a certain childishness—I had almost said a silliness—of manner which to many men is a more absolute charm than any other that a woman can display.

A pretty little woman ! a dear little woman ! and, above all, not an atom of harm in her !

She lived in a low, old-fashioned white stone house, called Mephram Park, about half-

way between Cambray Castle and Hollowcroft, being distant somewhat over two miles from each. There were stone pilasters in front of it, and a long conservatory on one side into which opened the drawing-room windows, and in which once, long ago, Dick Gaskell had whispered words of love into Constance Harlowe's trembling ears.

The drawing-room was long and low and cosy, the mantelpiece was draped with Eastern embroidery and old lace, the sofas and armchairs were wide and roomy, and were covered in soft rich-coloured plush and satin, and large lace bordered cushions of different colours were flung about over them; there was a great deal of lace and drapery, an immense variety of modern china animals—dogs, cats, mice, monkeys swarmed on every table and upon every shelf—bunches of evergreens and pampas grass filled every vase, and were made into subtle erections in divers corners, a shower of photographs, chiefly of young men in high white collars, were spread over the whole room in plush frames, and

china frames, in brass or silver frames, and after dusk, two lamps, with large rose-coloured shades, were wont to shed a subdued roseate radiance over the whole room.

It is five o'clock, and the curtains are drawn, and the Chinese lanterns in the conservatory beyond have been lighted, the little tea-table has been laid out before the fire, and Mrs. Clitheroe and Miss Lamb are having five o'clock tea together.

"Did you leave my darlings all right, Lamb?" inquires Mrs. Clitheroe.

"Yes, Mrs. Clitheroe, they were quite good and happy; Susan was giving them their tea." Susan was the schoolroom maid who was deputed to look after the little girls when Miss Lamb was on duty elsewhere.

"Lily was in ecstasies over her doll's new hat," volunteered Miss Lamb presently, without raising her eyes from the piece of white needlework in her hands.

"Sweet angel!" murmured the sweet angel's mother with her mouth full of buttered toast. "Delighted with her new book was she——"

“Doll’s hat, I said——”

“Oh, Ah!—won’t you have your tea, Lamb? And, please, put a log of wood on the fire. Toast or seed cake, did you say? Ah, my dear Lamb, how sad it is for a poor little wife to be left so much alone as I am! Ah, that horrid, horrid business that robs me of my James! What should I do without my three pets to comfort me!”

“What, indeed!” replied Miss Lamb, and it would have been quite impossible from the expression of her imperturbable face to have gathered exactly with what amount of significance she made the remark.

Then she laid her work gently down upon a table and got up to do as she was told—to put the log of wood upon the fire.

Edith Lamb was regally tall; as she stood up against the glow of the fire-light the lines of her grand figure were thrown into strong relief—she had great sombre inscrutable eyes, dusky rough hair, and a clear brown complexion. Her features were irregular, and by

no means beautiful ; in fact, her appearance was singular rather than handsome.

“ Oh, no ! dear Lamb is no beauty,” Mrs. Clitheroe would say to her friends ; “ she is very tall certainly, but men never admire those huge women, and her skin is quite sallow, poor dear. But then Lamb is such an excellent creature ! So good with the children ; and always so nice and companionable to me ; oh, Lamb suits me thoroughly—she and I understand each other perfectly.”

In only half of which statement she was right. Miss Lamb understood Mrs. Clitheroe perfectly, but Mrs. Clitheroe did not understand Miss Lamb in the very least.

Whilst the governess was stooping down, with her back turned before the fire, putting the log on the burning embers, Mrs. Clitheroe remarked casually :

“ If Mr. Latimer should call this evening, I shall ask him to stay to dinner, and, of course, Lamb, you will dine with me.”

“ Yes, Mrs. Clitheroe.” The fire required a

good deal of attention, and the hot glow seemed to scorch Miss Lamb's face.

"I really half expect dear James back, and I have told Ward to lay the table for three, as, in case he doesn't turn up in time for dinner you can occupy his place. I should not, of course, entertain Mr. Latimer by myself, for you know I never do the naughty, fast things some women do when their husbands are away; but with my sober Lamb to play propriety, I feel sure that James would consider his little wife quite well protected."

Her "sober Lamb" rose rather suddenly from her knees. Mrs. Clitheroe was peering into the teapot, her fluffy head leant daintily forward—she was stirring up the sluggish tea-leaves with a spoon—her little short fingers, glittering with diamonds, had struck an attitude over their occupation, for fingers as well as figures can be made to look artificial and self-conscious. She did not see the sombre fire in the great eyes that were bent upon her, looking her up and down with that quick angry flash and a scornful curl upon

the proud upper lip, much as Goliath may have eyed the boy David when he first caught sight of the pigmy who had come to measure himself against his strength.

Only for a second, and then it was over, the eyelids fell, the little white pinafore she was hemming was taken up again, and Miss Lamb said very quietly, "I am quite ready to play propriety, Mrs. Clitheroe, if that is the game that you have a fancy to play at."

Gerald Latimer, coming out of the raw, misty night ten minutes later into this paradise of warmth and luxury and rose-coloured radiance, thought he had never seen so harmonious a picture as the two women in that warmly-curtained room, lingering over their teacups in front of the fire.

He came and sat down, with the ease of a guest who knows himself to be welcome, on the thick white fur hearthrug, with his back to the fire, nursing his knees. He had changed his hunting gear—for the day had been a blank, and he had gone home early—and he wore a rough tweed suit and knickerbockers, not

such a dress as a man cares to dine with a lady in.

"You are to stay and dine, sir," said Lucy Clitheroe to him, as she handed him his cup of tea. As she spoke she tilted her head a little on one side and looked at him saucily and playfully. Gerald, who had a certain knack of suiting himself to the nature of the person in whose company he found himself, took the cup with two hands, and pressed hers as he took it; she responded with a playful rap upon his knuckles.

"Do you hear, you are to dine here, sir!"

"Can't, madam," he answered laconically.

"Why not, pray?"

"Just look at my clothes."

"Well"—looking him over from head to foot—"what's the matter with them; they look pretty tidy for you."

"How can a man dine with a lady in such a kit?" he protested.

"Pooh!" said the lady; "you are to stay. James is coming home."

"Is he?"

"He will want to see you."

"Will he?"

"I had a telegram from him to-day; he will be back in time for dinner; no wonder I look happy."

"No wonder. But your husband is not coming back to-night."

"What do you mean; don't frighten me—have you heard any bad news?" She pressed her hands rather sensationally over the region of her heart. "For pity's sake, if there is bad news——"

"Silly little goose, look at the clock; don't you see that the last train was in half-an-hour ago!"

Miss Lamb had not spoken a single word; she did not raise her eyes, but a subtle smile played upon her lips; if she could have spoken, she would have said, "yes, and she knew that before you came in," but she said nothing.

"So you see," continued Gerald, "that it would not do for me to stay and dine with you, would it!"

Lucy Clitheroe was leaning back in her chair with her lace handkerchief to her lips; she wore a pink tea-gown, trimmed with yellowish lace, the fire-light flickered merrily over the flowing silk drapery.

"Ah, wretch!" she cried, "to frighten me like that, I, who so adore my James. I thought of railway accidents, and all sorts of horrors; how stupid of me not to see how late it is; but about your dining, how I wish you could stay! Ah, by-the-way, happy thought! Why shouldn't Lamb dine with us, eh, Lamb? You wouldn't mind, for once, would you? Though I know you have had your early dinner, still, you know, as my dear old man can't be here, it seems a pity to turn Mr. Latimer out in the cold, doesn't it; and, oh, yes, Lamb, you must take James's place, please."

Edith Lamb bent her head almost mutely. No one could guess how she longed to cry out, "Hypocrite! when you settled it before he came in; why go through this farce?" But a terror greater than the love of truth struck her dumb, the terror of being turned out

homeless and friendless into a world of whose harshness to the poor and helpless she had had ample experience which she was far from desiring to renew. So she murmured an unintelligible assent, and relapsed into silence, stooping down again over her work.

“Do you know, Gerald,” said Mrs. Clitheroe presently, “that my arch enemy, Lady Harlowe, was here to-day? Heavens, how I detest that woman! I took care to tell her how we met Mr. Gaskell driving with your sister the other day, when she was making such a hue and cry after him.”

“What did you do that for?” inquired Gerald, who was nibbling at his fingers as he sat doubled up, knees and nose together, on the hearthrug, and whose eyes, curiously enough, were fixed, not on his lively little hostess, but on the dusky bent head of the governess in the background.

“Oh, to rile her, of course! She would give her eyes, I know, to catch him again for Constance, now that he is the owner of Hollowcroft and a big man in the county—

and I owe her one for the way she pitched into *me*—poor little innocent me, two years ago, because Dick proposed to her in that conservatory—as if I could help it! or stop him making a fool of himself! She came here and told me to my face I had got up the whole thing, and had encouraged clandestine meetings, and heaven knows what! James was furious—she left me in tears, literally in tears! Oh, if I could make her uncomfortable now it would be a real pleasure—and I think I've at least managed to implant a very pretty jealousy about your sister in her ancient breast."

Gerald's eyes suddenly flashed up at her—they had been lazy and dreamy enough before, fixed idly upon that dark bent head in the shadow, but now they were wide-awake enough—Eve's name roused a something in each one of her brother's hearts that nothing else under the sun had ever had the power to do.

"My sister!" he said sharply; "what has Eve got to do with it? I don't see how any

jealousy about her can possibly arise in any quarter!" He spoke haughtily, almost angrily; it was as though a veritable sword had leapt from its scabbard in defence of her name.

Lucy Clitheroe had come across this extraordinary sensitiveness in her young admirer upon the subject of his sister once or twice before—she coloured a little and laughed.

"Now, please, dear boy, don't fly out at me! As if I meant any harm of that pretty, sweet sister of yours, whom I admire so much. I only wish I could know her better—but you see a lovely girl like that *must* have lovers some day—and why not Dick Gaskell as well as another? He is the best match in the county."

"Eve does not require lovers—she has us," replied Gerald coldly; "and as to matches, they don't concern her because she never intends to marry."

"*Indeed!*" with a very pretty uplifting of her eyebrows.

“Neither do my brothers intend to marry;” and, after a slight pause, “neither do I.”

For a few seconds nobody spoke; the clock ticked noisily, and Miss Lamb’s needle clicked audibly through her work. Mrs. Clitheroe peered again into the teapot, although all pretence at tea had long been over—it was she who broke the silence with an affected little laugh.

“What a sweeping condemnation of married bliss these awful resolutions imply!” Then looking up swiftly at Miss Lamb. “Lamb, dear, go and see that my sweet ones are safely in bed, and you can hear them their prayers for me, please—and then you had better dress yourself for dinner, for it must be getting late.”

Perhaps the governess was glad to be released, for she rose very quickly, folded her work hastily together, and left the room without a word.

Chapter the Eleventh.

FALSE LOVE AND TRUE.

“She is pretty to walk with,
And witty to talk with,
And pleasant, too, to think on.

But as when an authentic watch is shown,
Each man winds up and rectifies his own,
So in our very judgments.”

SIR JOHN SUCKLING.





CHAPTER XI.

FALSE LOVE AND TRUE.

"She is pretty to walk with,
And witty to talk with,
And pleasant, too, to think on.

But as when an authentic watch is shown,
Each man winds up and rectifies his own,
So in our very judgments."

SIR JOHN SUCKLING.

"GERALD!" exclaimed Lucy, as soon as the door closed behind Miss Lamb's retreating footsteps. "Gerald!" and she spoke his name tenderly as well as reproachfully. "*Why* will you say these kind of things before that woman?"

Gerald's lips parted, then closed again with a snap, a swift flash of anger swept across his averted face, but he subdued it quickly, and she did not notice it. "Cannot you see how you compromise me!" she continued, drawing insensibly a little nearer to him.

“Compromise *you!* what, when I say I don’t mean to marry?” cried Gerald, smiling at her, and entering somehow all at once into the fun of the situation.

“Yes, for people are so ill-natured, you know; and, of course, Miss Lamb, or anybody else who heard you say such a thing, would imagine at once that it was on *my* account—for *my* sake—that you have determined to remain unmarried!”

I have said elsewhere that there was an inherent love of mischief, for pure mischief’s sake, deeply implanted in the nature of the young Latimers. When Gerald saw his hostess leaning towards him with that sentimental and tender look in her eyes, and realized that she was leading him on to make love to her more or less in earnest, he became at once seized with a mad desire to take some fun out of the folly of this silly little woman, after whom, to suit a purpose of his own, he had been dangling ostentatiously for some weeks past.

He put his head on one side—at what he

conceived to be a correct angle for the expression of an unhappy lover's feelings—and then he sighed, and, after an instant of silence, he cast up his eyes in so intense and melting a fashion that Mrs. Clitheroe withdrew her own from his burning glances in some confusion.

“Well, perhaps it is so,” he murmured, and then he took hold of her hand, and being quite sure of what it behoved him to do under the circumstances, he began kissing it.

He was not possibly quite prepared for what followed. Mrs. Clitheroe instantly deposited her fluffy head upon his shoulder.

Now, what was Gerald to do? What would you have done, my reader, if you are a man and a gentleman, and a pretty, silly little woman, whom you do not at all dislike, were to lay her head suddenly and unexpectedly upon your shoulder?

Well, Gerald did what I suppose most young men would have done in his place, he kissed the absent Mr. Clitheroe's wife very affectionately indeed upon her rosy lips. He

got rather hot as he did so, not with love, but with shame, for he felt himself to be somewhat of a blackguard, knowing that he had encouraged her little advances. At the same time, what else was he to do? When a lady reclines her head thus fondly, there is always the chance of her keeping it there until some such desperate expedient is resorted to, and, supposing that Lucy's head had remained immovable, and the door had opened and there had entered the footman with coals, the housemaid with a duster, the children to say good night, or—worst horror of all—Edith Lamb ready dressed for dinner!

The bare idea of such a catastrophe sent all kinds of cold shivers down Gerald's back. Besides, would it not be uncourteous on his part, he reasoned rapidly to himself, brusque and almost unmanly, were he to fail to pay this trifling tribute to the charms of his hostess; and was it not necessary to get rid of that fluffy head under his chin at any price, whatever the sacrifice? It was imperative that he should do so.

The sacrifice, indeed, was by no means a painful one ; as a matter of fact, it was rather pleasant than otherwise ; Gerald having convinced himself that to kiss Mrs. Clitheroe was an absolute necessity, proceeded to make a virtue of that necessity, and to play his part in a manly and efficient manner.

It was only after the third caress that Lucy awoke, as it were, out of a trance of beatitude and thrust him wildly away from her ; she sank back in her chair, and Gerald rose with a sense of relief from his knees, into which lowly attitude he had somehow contrived to sink, tucked his coat tails under his elbows, and leant back against the mantelpiece, feeling himself to be master of the situation once more.

“ Oh, Gerald ! how could you ! ” cried Lucy brokenly from behind her handkerchief ; “ how could you be so dreadfully, horribly naughty ! It is fearfully wicked ! ”

“ Well, it isn't exactly right,” assented Gerald, “ but then, you see, we all do wrong occasionally,” he added with the dispassionate

calmness of an uninterested spectator. Now that it was over and he was safe—he was quite self-possessed and comfortable, whereas Lucy wept, or pretended to weep, distressedly behind her lace pocket-handkerchief.

“You must promise me *never, never* to do it again,” she cried; “you know how devotedly I love James, and what a good wife I always try to be; and I wouldn’t have him know that you were so very naughty as to kiss me for the whole world,” and then she got up, stood before him, and laid hold of Gerald’s shoulders, one in each hand, looking him straight in the face, “Promise me, Gerald, that you will never do it again, never, never!” And it is pretty sure that had Gerald instantly repeated the offence he would have received forgiveness for his audacity. He had not, however, the remotest intention of sinning again, although he was too wise to tell her so.

“I am not going to make rash promises,” he said laughingly and significantly; “but now, little woman, you had better go away and dress, hadn’t you?”

And Lucy went away convinced that he was madly in love with her.

She said to herself, as she was dressing for dinner, that it was really a terrible misfortune for her that men in general would fall in love with her, and that Gerald Latimer in particular should be so impressionable and so "foolish."

"Poor boy!" she murmured as she looked at herself in the glass and put the finishing touches to her face—a little puff of powder here, and a little dab of something suspiciously like rouge there. "Poor boy! he is quite gone on me, that's evident! it's very embarrassing for me, of course; but how can I help it! I must try and talk him out of his infatuation if I can. Perhaps, who knows? I may be the blessed means of influencing his character for good!"

There was certainly "no harm" in Lucy Clitheroe, was there?

But Mrs. Clitheroe's toilette was a matter of time, and whilst she was going through its mysteries and intricacies, assisted by her maid

upstairs, something else was going on downstairs in her absence.

“At last!” murmurs Gerald below his breath, as the door opens softly some few minutes after Mrs. Clitheroe’s exit. “I thought I was never going to get a word with you,” he says, going half-way to meet her across the room.

“Have you anything to say to me?” inquires Miss Lamb, tranquilly depositing her work-basket, two books, a copy-book, a paint-box, and a couple of white pottery flower-pots, deliberately one after the other upon a side-table. He makes no effort to help her, but stands looking on moodily with his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed on her face, and with a totally different expression in them to the mock sentimental glances he had cast at Lucy Clitheroe. Neither does he answer her question save by asking one of her:

“Are you never going to be any kinder to me?”

“And are you never going to leave off

coming here to spoon Mrs. Clitheroe under my eyes?" she retorts scornfully.

"Yes, if you will tell me at once that you don't love me, Edith; but you won't do that, because you can't."

"Have I ever told you that I do love you, pray?"

"No, by heavens, you haven't!" he broke forth impetuously. "You would rather die than own yourself to be human; you are too proud."

She had come forward into the glow of the fire-light, and stood there looking down, with her hands clasped loosely together, and the fire glow playing over the strong characteristic face.

The young man looked at her fixedly, almost reverently.

"Edith," he said softly, "I had better make a clean breast of it at once to you. Not five minutes ago, here on this very hearthrug, I have been kissing Mrs. Clitheroe."

She looked up at him with startled eyes.

"It is quite true," he continued hurriedly.

"It was hateful and horrid of me—it was partly because she laid her head down on my shoulder and seemed to expect it of me ; but, also, it was partly my fault, I led her on ; I know it was sheer devilry ; I believe !—there, now, I have told you all, and—and—I suppose you'll never speak to me again !"

She had listened to him in silence, still gravely looking down fixedly at the glowing fire logs, but as he ended his little explanation ruefully and somewhat haltingly, a slow smile lit up her serious eyes, and she looked up quickly at him.

"I think," she said, "that you are the only absolutely honest man I ever met in my life."

He flushed up with pleasure at her words.

"You forgive me, then?" he said eagerly, making a step towards her and trying to take her hand, but she drew hers away.

"Who talked of forgiving? And what have I got to do with it? Why do you take pleasure in leading the silly little thing on and getting her talked about? You are doing her a great injury. You know she is more

than half in love with you, and you encourage her to think herself entirely so ; these sort of things make scandals. Why do you do it ? ”

“ How can I hurt her ? There is no harm in the little fool. Do we not all know, by the frequency by which it is repeated to us, that our dear Lucy is ‘ devoted to her James ? ’ ”

“ Pooh ! How can any woman be devoted to *that* ? ” and Miss Lamb gave a scornful wave of her hand towards the wall to the right of her. There, from ceiling to floor, hung in a gorgeous frame, a full-length portrait of the absent master of the house. “ Does *that* represent a creature to be adored ? An object of blind devotion ; a poem of love’s young dream ? ”

Mr. Clitheroe’s portrait certainly answered to none of these things, even although the painter may reasonably be presumed to have given as flattering a version of his sitter as might be possible. Fat and coarse, with small dissipated-looking eyes and a bushy black beard, Mr. Clitheroe could scarcely have been

a man of whose possession any woman of refinement could have been proud.

“Well, he is not handsome, certainly,” said Gerald laughing; “but then, neither am I!”

“You! How can you name yourself in the same breath!” she burst forth somewhat impetuously, scanning him from head to foot with one rapid glance of her splendid eyes; and then, perhaps, because the words had broken from her unawares, Edith Lamb coloured hotly, and when a pale-faced woman blushes, there is no hiding that tell-tale betrayal of her heart. After that Gerald did take her hands, and did not let them go, although she struggled to free them.

“You ought to leave poor little Mrs. Clitheroe in peace,” she said rather weakly.

“You know perfectly well why I don’t,” he answered in a low voice. “Ever since the first day I saw you in the lane with the children—do you remember it? I was riding home after a long day by a short cut, and I dropped over the fence on Pembroke, just in

front of you, into the road. How frightened poor little Lily was, and how she cried, and I was obliged to stop and get off my animal in order to help you to dry her tears. Ever since that day I have loved you, and you know it! And how was I to get to know you, to see you again—to be with you often? to come to this house, where I can get a chance of speaking to you sometimes. There was no other way of getting at Mrs. Clitheroe's governess—save by playing upon Mrs. Clitheroe's vanity, and making sham love to Mrs. Clitheroe herself. She loves admiration. She likes a man dangling after her. I admire her to her heart's content, and dangle after her in the most approved fashionable manner, and so I am a favoured mortal, and come here whenever I like. Oh! I would do it all over again, if it were to be done, so that I might be near you and see you sometimes.”

There was a passion in his voice that half conquered her. As she stood there with averted face and eyes that would not meet his—although her hands remained fast locked

in his—she trembled visibly from head to foot.

There is no evidence of emotion so powerful and so overpowering as that—that Edith Lamb, so proud and so cold, should tremble because he was speaking to her turned his brain to fire, and set all his pulses beating.

“Edith! Edith!” he cried, “for God’s sake be pitiful, and give me one word of hope!”

And then she straightened herself with a sort of despair.

“Not one! Not one!” she cried hoarsely and harshly. “Not one, ever. I will never marry you.”

“Why not?” he whispered back, looking straightly into the eyes that were on a level with his own, for he was short and she was tall for a woman.

“Because—oh, because——” and a pale unreal smile swept like a wintry gleam across the passion-tossed features. “Of course, because I am a governess—is not that reason enough?” Something like the ghost of a laugh broke

from her pale lips. He flung away the hands he held angrily, almost contemptuously.

"That is a lie," he said shortly.

And though it is not considered civil to tell a lady to her face that she lies, yet Edith Lamb liked her lover better for saying that than had he made her a dozen flattering speeches.

"Lies are sometimes convenient things," she answered calmly, and smiling a little, too. "And the truth is not always easy to say. I am not going to marry you, and I can't tell you why."

"For *can't* read *won't!*" he said rather bitterly.

"Certainly, if you prefer the word."

He was silent for a minute.

Miss Lamb sat down and took up her work. Gerald suddenly swung round on his heel and faced her.

"I shall go on coming here until you change your mind," he said with a certain savage anger that made her pulses glow and her heart beat, for that was what she loved in

him, the roughness and the doggedness that would not be repulsed.

But she did not raise her eyes from her work.

“And kissing Mrs. Clitheroe?”

“Yes, kissing Mrs. Clitheroe if it be necessary.”

“What a scandal there will be in South Meadowshire. Clitheroe *v.* Clitheroe and Latimer! Will you subpœna me as a witness?”

“Edith,” taking no notice of her scornful words, “till one of us is dead I will not give you up!” He bent over her and took her by the wrists, grasping her so hard that he hurt her.

“Would you send me out of the shelter of this house and drive me out into the world again?”

She raised her eyes to his, full of pathos and reproach.

At that moment, if Gerald had not kissed Lucy Clitheroe's lips only twenty minutes ago, he would have kissed the woman he loved. But he was fastidious, and it seemed to him

that Edith's lips would be polluted now by the touch of his—perhaps had he laid these scruples aside and dared to take by force from her what she certainly would have denied to him in cold blood—perhaps the temptation of his love and the real passion she felt for him would have been too much for her ; but he did not dare to do this, other arguments were in his heart, other words of pleading and of prayer thronged hotly to his lips, but before he could speak them there came a soft rustling of silken skirts along the passage outside.

“Lamb! Lamb!” cried out Lucy's high-pitched voice ; “ and where are you, Gerald?”

Edith pushed away Gerald's hands.

“ Why does she call *you* by your christian name and *me* by my surname!” she whispered laughing.

“ I hate it so,” muttered Gerald.

When Lucy Clitheroe sailed in at the door in a marvellous blue and white concoction of satin and lace, she saw Gerald Latimer leaning against the mantelpiece, with a moody and

slightly bored face, warming his toes on the fender, whilst Miss Lamb sat by, silently and dully apathetic, stitching at Lily's muslin pinafore under the reading-lamp.



Chapter the Twelfth.

AVICE'S FLIGHT.

“ When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can sooth her melancholy,
What art can wash her guilt away ? ”

GOLDSMITH.





CHAPTER XII.

AVICE'S FLIGHT.

“When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can soothe her melancholy,
What art can wash her guilt away?”

GOLDSMITH.

Now in these rainy December weeks, when the South Meadowshire hounds were having so many days of fine scent and good sport, there existed in another quarter of the British dominions a young woman who was very unhappy indeed.

Things were going badly, very badly, with Avice Colston. Her lover came not back to her, neither did he write to her, whilst another great dread that had haunted her for many weeks past, like a black and fearful nightmare, ceased to be merely the shadow of a

dire possibility, and became to her a terrible and awful reality.

All Avice's pretty fresh looks were fading away day by day, her eyes had lost their brightness, her cheeks were wan and sallow, her very hair lay in a dank and lustreless shock upon her brow, whilst her steps lagged wearily and heavily as she dragged herself miserably about the house. She did not go out much in these dreary days, but kept indoors mostly, sitting often in tears by the fireside—doing nothing—neglecting even her household duties to weep alone over her sorrows. Then, too, a sudden dread of her father seemed to possess her. When she heard his foot upon the doorstep, she would start up guiltily and pretend to busy herself over her cooking or her cleaning, and she would avoid his eye and begin humming a merry tune so that he should not notice her depression and her wretchedness. But for all her efforts it seemed to her that Stephen looked at her strangely sometimes, with a fixed, hard look of won-

derment in his stern grey eyes that frightened her. Often he questioned her roughly and sternly about Dick. Had she heard from him? Was he ill? What kept him away? When was he coming back? And Avice parried the questions as well as she could. She had never told her father that she had had but that one single letter from him since he had gone away. She answered him in a vague, off-hand fashion. Oh, yes! she had heard; of course she had heard! Dick was all right, he was coming soon; and why couldn't people be let alone to settle their own affairs, and so on; but God only knew with what anguish of soul the poor girl forced herself to utter these airy and misleading replies.

And then, at last, there came a day when the storm burst, when neither courage nor deception availed her any longer, and when, like a thunderbolt, the truth burst in upon Stephen Colston in all its naked hideousness—would Avice ever forget that night when, cowering like a stricken thing upon the hearth-

rug, she listened shudderingly to her father's curses.

How he stormed, and how he raved! How he called her by every foul and vile name, likening her in his cruel injustice to everything that is basest and most degraded upon the face of the earth; whilst she—she could answer nothing—not a word!—only sob brokenly and despairingly at his feet.

“But I will kill him,” she heard him gasp forth out of the chaos of his rage and fury, “if he does not make an honest woman of you—if before your shame becomes known, and my name and your dead mother’s is dragged openly in the dirt before the eyes of the world—then I will go and look for him, this fine lover of yours, look for him till I find him, and I will kill him like a dog.” Then came the rapid steps across the stone floor, the quick opening and slamming of the outer door, and Avice was alone, whilst Stephen Colston went forth into the dark roughness of the winter night to battle with his fury by the side of the white foaming waves that dashed

themselves as madly as human grief and human passion against the sea-wall at the foot of his garden.

Ah, it was a bitter pill for the old man to swallow ! He who had held up his head so high above his fellows, who had thought to raise himself still higher, who had built so much upon the future of his only daughter—for it was not so much in his disappointed love as in his shattered ambition that he suffered, it was such a downfall of all his hopes—he had counted so much upon her ; she was to have been made a lady of—dressed in silks and satins and carried aloft above the heads of her compeers into that vague world of gentility that had seemed to him such a desirable paradise for her to enter, all this was to have come to her through the fine gentleman lover whom his own cleverness, as he believed, had secured for her ; and now, what had it all ended in ? Shame, disgrace, a common story of man's wickedness and of woman's weakness, and Stephen Colston would hold up his head in Crowbay never, nevermore !

How many hours he walked up and down in the darkness and the wind alone, with the roaring of the waves and the long lines of foam shining palely white through the gloom, he never knew.

It was cold, but he never felt the cold—his heart burned so hotly within him—it was wet, but he did not feel the chill of the driving rain—his head was so madly on fire—he he had no courage to think of what was to be done, he only went over the past, cursing his daughter and the man who had betrayed her, cursing himself, too, for his short-sighted folly, and swearing to himself, blindly and madly, that he would seek him out and kill him, kill him without mercy, as he had said to Avice, like a dog.

And then, as he paced hotly and wildly across the low sand heaps and the shingle—staggering often as he walked like a man that is drunk—there came the first cold, grey gleam of the coming dawn, far, far away out of the stormy East. The blackness of night became somehow lightened—there was no sunrise, no gleam

of brightness from beneath the cloud rack—only, all at once, the gloom of utter darkness became dispelled. The waves, no longer a chaos of inky murkiness, took shape and form, and came tumbling in grandly and steadily in huge breakers that tossed themselves with a steady regularity against the wooden breakwaters. The cliffs detached themselves greyly from the black heavens behind them, the sweeping lines of the bay became dimly visible, and the cold white of the fishermen's cottages loomed out one after another in the clustering village to the right, then Stephen looked back and saw his own house, the six-roomed villa that had made such a big man of him; saw the porch with its stuccoed pillars that he thought so handsome, the muslin-draped parlour window that was such an emblem of gentility in his eyes, the trim little garden laid out on either side, and as he looked at it all he shuddered. Where was his pride in all this now?

He turned his back upon it hastily, between him and the sea lay his own little craft, the boat that had been his delight—the “Lady

Avice," called after his daughter—his eye fell upon her, at first idly and without interest. She was well drawn up, high and dry, and covered in with a tarpaulin.

Stephen was proud of his boat. Almost mechanically he bent his weary steps to where she lay, stooping down over her and patting her timbers with careful and loving fingers. Then he stood up and looked out with haggard eyes over the tumbling mass of the stormy waves across the bay. When a sailor is in trouble his heart goes out to his first love—the sea. There was something amidst the shipwreck of his home-life that was restful and soothing to the old man in the sight of those heaving, rushing billows that foamed and roared so relentlessly on as though in a mute sympathy with the misery and the despair that possessed him.

"I have no daughter—no home," he muttered; "it were better for me to die and be forgotten."

And presently, by some strange unfathomable instinct that made him seek that stormy

bosom as a refuge, Stephen Colston found himself out upon the broad cold waters alone. The "Lady Avice" was battling her way out through the foam and turmoil with her tiny sail well set before the gale, and the green grey waters sweeping ever and anon over her gunwale.

The morning light came on greyly and dimly; the old man's battered spray-dashed face and tossing grey hair, and the bent shoulders, clad in rough dark serge, stood out against the background of cloud and sea like a silhouette by Rembrandt. His back was to his desecrated home, and his hard, angry face set towards the ocean that he loved, and so the fishing smack sped quickly seawards—there was no one to see her as she flew on her outward way—becoming fainter and smaller at every instant, till at length she was merely a black speck upon the distant waters, and then, one more second, and the "Lady Avice" and her skipper had vanished, and Crowbay saw them no more.

There had been no one to watch the old

man's departure from the windows of Sea-view Cottage ; long ago had the house been empty and deserted by all save the little servant maid, who slept in the small back attic behind that had no view of the sea from its narrow sloping window.

Avice dragged herself slowly from her knees, after her father had left her to go out alone into the night, cursing her as he went. Her face was white and scared ; she rose with difficulty and sank back miserably into her chair, gazing with hopeless, terrified eyes into the smouldering fire.

But, unlike her father, she wasted no tears and no curses over the past ; all she thought of was of the future—of what she was to do, of how she was to provide for herself, of where she was to go. For to stay here, at Crowbay, with her father, now that he knew all, and could taunt her hour by hour with her disgrace, was what Avice Colston had no mind to do. Besides, she must find Dick, must seek him out and force him to keep his broken promises to her ere her father should find him and

fulfil his awful threat. For Avice feared her father's stern harshness; if he had sworn to kill her lover, she believed in her heart that he would surely find means to do so—she shuddered as she thought of it.

Very soon she had made up her mind what to do, and that it must be done at once—now, —this very night.

She stole stealthily upstairs and put together a few necessities in a small bag; in it, too, she put her treasures—a locket with a star of pearls upon it which Dick had given her, a ring, also his gift, and a pair of smart gold ear-rings, things that some instinct had made her carefully conceal from her father. She had a little money, too, locked up in a rosewood box, the savings of her whole life—it amounted to nearly five pounds, and seemed almost a fortune to Avice; this she sewed carefully into an old glove and placed in the bosom of her dress. When all these preparations were complete, Avice dressed herself warmly in a cloth jacket, and put on stout boots, and her Sunday bonnet,

with a thick veil tied over it, then she crept down the stairs again and out at the back door, across the kitchen garden on to the flat plain, behind where the watercress beds were, and through a gate beyond, that led her straight on to the Exeter high road. For Avice was going to walk to Exeter that night and take the train on to London in the morning, and once in London she had no doubt that she would find Dick easily. Now that her father had been so harsh to her, poor Avice's thoughts turned warmly to her lover. She began to take all sorts of excuses for him in her heart; it was his poverty, surely, that had kept him away, perhaps, even, he might be ill. She had his address, the address to which she had written him so many hopeless and despairing letters, and that was where she meant to go to find him.

Ten weary miles on a dark, wet winter's night. It was a very long way, the road was muddy, the wind blew straight in her face, there were little gusty showers of misty rain that seemed to penetrate through her clothes,

chilling her to the skin ; but still she plodded on and on, slowly but steadily ; she had plenty of time before her, and the fisherman's daughter was used to wind and rain. There was no going back for her—home was home no longer ; all she thought of was to find Dick, to warn him of her father's revenge, and to cast herself upon his compassion, and, surely, surely if he was so very poor as he had often told her, surely he would be glad enough to make her his wife, if only to gain Stephen's forgiveness and with it the dowry that seemed to Avice such a vast one, which had been promised to him as her husband.

When the morning dawned she was still far enough away from her destination, and it was nine o'clock, and the busy day had begun in earnest before she caught sight of the towers of Exeter Cathedral, with the city houses clustered about them, standing out grandly above the plain in the far distance. Presently there came market carts jogging by her into the town, droves of sheep and calves, horses tied tail and head to each other in a long string, for it

was market day, and all the world was going into Exeter. At last there went by a fat, good-natured farmer's wife trotting along in her covered cart, with her load of fresh butter and eggs, towards the old city, who spied the tired-looking woman plodding along the muddy road and took compassion upon her, and offered to give her a lift for the last three miles. It was time, for Avice was faint with hunger and fatigue, and scarcely knew how those last miles would have been encompassed without the friendly Samaritan who had thus come to her rescue.

She had not long to wait in Exeter for the London train—only just time to go into a modest coffee-house she had been to once before with her father; she bought herself a roll and a cup of milk, and brushed the mud from her skirts, and then she walked to the station and took herself a third-class ticket for Paddington.

All that was easy and simple enough; it was only when, late on a winter's afternoon, she found herself at the Great Western ter-

minus, that Avice's real troubles began. Tired and hungry, worn out with her night's walk, and with the many emotions that had overpowered her since yesterday, it seemed to her, when the station lights at length gleamed upon her, that the worst of her troubles was over, and that her journeyings must be at an end. They were, in fact, only just beginning.

Nobody seemed to be able to tell her where Laburnam Road was to be found; she knew, indeed, that it was in Notting Hill, and into a Notting Hill omnibus, a puzzled porter, who had cudgelled his brains and scratched his head vainly in her service for five whole minutes at a time, finally recommended her to get.

But Notting Hill is a vast area of trim streets and terraces, amongst which poor Avice wandered in bewildered perplexity for hours, till at last it was so late, and she was so cold and hungry, that she sought shelter and food in a small inn, where, even for the doubtful comforts of some tough cold meat

and stale bread, and leave to rest her weary limbs on a bench by the kitchen fire, a considerable hole was made in her slender finances.

Mrs. Mines was having a "clean out" of her front parlours that next morning, when suddenly, over the wire blind which tastefully decorated the open window, she espied a pale and tired looking young woman come up the steps to the front door and ring the visitors' bell.

She didn't look much like "a let," certainly, with those shabby clothes and that small bag in her hand; neither, on the other hand, did she exactly resemble a beggar.

Mrs. Mines thanked her stars that it had not fallen to the lot of "the girl," an irresponsible young person of thirteen, to decide upon the merits of this evidently doubtful case, and went to open the door herself.

"Is Mr. Gaskell in?"

"Who? *Mr. Gaskell*, did you say! Laws no! he ain't here at all."

"But he has been here lately?"

“Not for two years or more, I should say.”

The young woman leant back against the doorway.

“But, surely,” she faltered, turning very white, “surely he has called for his letters?”

“Letters,” repeated Mrs. Mines, and then a sudden light broke in upon her. “Ah! it be you, then, my dear, as has written all them letters? Ah, they are all safe enough downstairs in my cupboard—safe enough all together—you shall have ’em, and welcome; but, Mr. Gaskell, he ain’t been near the place to fetch ’em!”

And then Mrs. Mines gave a cry, for the pale young woman fell forward prone across the threshold in a dead faint.





Chapter the Thirteenth.

TOM AT CAMBRAY CASTLE.

“ Eftsoones they heard a most melodious sound ! ”

“ Fairie Queene,” SPENCER.





CHAPTER XIII.

TOM AT CAMBRAY CASTLE.

"Eftsoones they heard a most melodious sound!"

"Fairie Queene," SPENCER.

"MAYN'T he take even me down to dinner, mamma?"

"My dear Constance, you know perfectly well that your father arranges these things. I have really no voice in the matter."

The long drawing-room at Cambray Castle was decked and adorned for action, all the candles were lighted, all the chintz covers had been taken off the crimson-silk rep chairs and sofas, all the best photograph books were laid out in dismal and dully suggestive rows, and Lord Harlowe, in evening dress, with his eye-glasses on his nose, was warming his feet at the fender and looking over the list of guests whom he expected to dinner.

For it was a gala night at Cambray. One of the six annual dinner parties, slow, tedious and formal, was about to take place. A great solemnity inaugurated these auspicious occasions. Lord and Lady Harlowe consulted each other for weeks beforehand concerning the invitations ; their proceedings were shrouded in deep and inscrutable mystery, held, as it were, behind closed doors. No whisper of who was to be asked, of who accepted, or who refused was suffered to reach the ears of their only daughter. If Constance plucked up courage to inquire upon these matters, she was silenced gently, but effectually, and told that "she would see when the time came," as though she had been an inquisitive young child.

When the list of the accepting guests was complete, which usually happened a good three weeks before the appointed day, then there came the dinner to be considered ; a schedule of dishes was submitted to Lord Harlowe, who ran his pen through those he did not approve of, and ticked off those which he would graciously permit of. This phase

of the proceedings was regulated with great simplicity, being chiefly based upon a strict economy; certain things were invariably eliminated from the viands—sweetbreads, truffles, and *pâtés de foie gras* never found a place in the *menus* of Lord Harlowe's banquets; they were looked upon as unduly expensive luxuries, and struck off the list incontinently. There were also details gone into concerning cream and butter, and rabbits were, by his lordship's express orders, enjoined to be pounded into *rissoles* and *timbales* in the place of chickens. All this being satisfactorily arranged, the next proceeding was to engage a man cook from the pastrycook's shop at Truxworth, as the family artist was always incapable of safely conducting a dinner of any length or magnitude, and Lady Harlowe usually went up to town two days beforehand, by second-class, in order to get fruits and tinned vegetables at their cheapest at the Stores.

When all was said and done and prepared, the worthy couple felt like wise generals before

a great battle, who have made every arrangement with a care and forethought which is bound to insure victory and success.

Behold Lady Harlowe now, upon the eve of the great engagement, attired in a well-worn crimson velvet gown and old lace that is as a familiar landmark of dignity and respectability to everybody in the county of Meadowshire, whilst Constance is condemned by the maternal fiat to a white muslin that has seen some service already, and is eminently unbecoming to her. More than once has poor Constance protested against those terrible white muslins that are home-made and meagre in cut, knowing full well that more justice would be done to her in some warm, full colour and in some richer material; but virginal muslin is an immovable theory in the mind of her mother; nothing is so nice and simple, she says, for a girl, forgetting that Constance is six-and-twenty, and that with her the age of innocence should surely be past.

“When I was a girl,” she says, “my dear

mother always dressed me in muslin ; young ladies should not ape the attire of married women, something simple and quiet is far more suitable to them."

So poor Constance, in her limp-washed frills, stands meekly quiescent to her fate, in this as in other matters, and ventures humbly to beg that her quasi-lover may take her into dinner. She has heard with satisfaction that of the twenty-four expected guests to-night not all are to be on the wrong side of fifty. It is true the Dalrymples of Castleton, the Montgomerys of Stonehurst, and other county magnates of unimpeachable age and respectability are coming, but there is a Miss Dalrymple, too, who has been invited, also a young hunting couple who are renting a small place from Lord Harlowe for the winter months. Mrs. Trimmer, the little flirtatious widow, who is always trying to induce somebody to become Mr. Trimmer's successor, and, wonder of wonders, Miss and a Mr. Latimer have also been added to the number of the invited. It will be, in point

of fact, a dinner-party of a far more frivolous character than any of its predecessors. "A few young people," Lady Harlowe had pleaded for; "just for once in a way," as, of course, Mr. Gaskell had to be asked. Her spouse had shaken his long and venerable head, and had feared that the innovation would lead to no good, would only "upset" Constance and let in the thin end of the wedge of rowdyism and inordinate revellings; then his lordship had relented with a ponderous "well, well," and an after murmur of "those young Latimers." Thereupon her ladyship had pulled herself up and had voted Miss Latimer fast and dangerous, and not a good friend for Constance, although she did not dare to ruin Dick's cause by repeating to his lordship that story about his having been seen driving about the country one day in her pony-cart—a rumour which had not failed to reach her through Mrs. Clitheroe, and which she had never quite cared to investigate. But even an old peer of strict principles and narrow-minded views is not al-

together impervious to the fascination of a very pretty face, and Lord Harlowe had noted Eve's young beauty at the meets with an approving eye, and had set his heart upon a nearer inspection of her charms. He silenced his wife's objections by remarking that the poor girl, having no mother, certain excuses might, with propriety, be made for her, and added that some notice from themselves, as being the leading people in South Meadowshire, would be, no doubt, a very great benefit and advantage to the motherless girl and her brothers. "The ægis of your name, my love," he said to his wife, "and the countenance of your kind notice will, I apprehend, be very highly appreciated by Miss Latimer and her brothers." The little bit of pompous flattery went down, and Miss and one Mr. Latimer received a formal invitation, which, after a whole day of battles-royal was, in the end, duly accepted.

The "Mr. Latimer" selected to be victimized on the occasion was the unlucky little Tom. It should by rights have been Gerald,

and Eve understood at the time she accepted Lady Harlowe's invitation that Gerald had resigned himself to accompany her, but when the morning came Gerald swore that he was engaged—had been engaged for days to dine at Mrs. Clitheroe's, whilst Charlie took himself up to town to attend an old college chum's bachelor dinner on the eve of his marriage, an event which, according to Tom, came off periodically whenever Charlie desired to shirk anything disagreeable—the mantle therefore descended upon little Tom. Up to five o'clock in the day little Tom was quite violent and utterly unmanageable. He swore by all his gods, by the Holy Fly, by the Piper that played before Moses, by the soul of his great grandmother, and by sundry other equally solemn and cabalistic personages, that nothing—no, nothing! should induce him to appear at the "Cambray feed" that night. Then when Eve, almost in tears, had actually sat down and composed a letter to Lady Harlowe to the effect that she and all her three brothers

were laid up with mumps and bronchitis, and so unable, any of them, to avail themselves of her kind invitation—when she had actually rung the bell in order to despatch Greyson on horseback to Cambray Castle with this frightful tissue of lies, which, as she owned almost weepingly, the very next morning at Gorseley Covers would unveil in all its audacious iniquity, then, at last, little Tom turned round, called her the greenest little flat that ever was created, and informed her that, of course, he had always meant to go with her, as he had set his heart upon dancing a Highland schottische with Lady Harlowe as soon as ever dinner was over.

It was, however, with no great anticipation of coming pleasure that Eve and Tom, in the Truxworth fly, rattled in over the sham drawbridge under the “Old Tudor” gateway.

“Let us turn back now,” suggested Tom feebly, “it’s not yet too late.”

“Oh, I wish we could!” almost groaned Eve.

"What on earth induced you to accept?"

"Goodness only knows! I thought it might be an advantage to you boys if Lord Harlowe took you up."

"An advantage? Moral or spiritual, do you mean?"

"Oh, no, shooting I meant, next autumn."

"Oh, I see! Loaves and fishes! For pity's sake let us order the fly at nine-thirty."

"Oh, Tom, we *can't*, it would be so rude. It will be too awfully slow, I am afraid. But we must bear it now we are in for it. We can't go away before anybody else. What on earth is this under the seat, Tom?"

"That? Oh, my coat!"

"Your coat? You have one on."

"It's a warmer one for coming home."

"It feels much harder than a coat," persisted Eve.

"Then it's something belonging to the cabby, his supper probably. I wouldn't kick it—ugh! here we are—do look at the rows of flunkeys, Eve! Here's royalty for you. My crackey! look at the powder and plush,

and their fat, white calves! How I should like to kick them."

"Hush! hush! for heaven's sake, Tom! And, dear boy—do, *do* try and behave, and don't be vulgar and talk slang!" says Eve in an agonized whisper as the door of their humble vehicle is flung open, and they are ushered into the great hall of the castle, with the suits of armour and the tapestry hanging up all round it.

Eve notices that Tom lingers behind her for a moment by the fly, but she has no time to remark his proceedings, for she finds herself ceremoniously conducted into a cloak-room, where two ladies-maids fly to divest her of her wrappings.

The unalterable laws of the stern and solemn etiquette of precedence hedge about the more distinguished guests of Lord and Lady Harlowe. Nothing can change or avert the doom that hangs over the head of each handled potentate. The Earl of Hammertongs, who has just come into his title, and is twenty-three years of age, takes in Lady Harlowe.

Old Lady Montgomery is escorted by her host, and an Honourable somebody, toothless and inarticulate, falls to poor Constance's fate. In vain had she pleaded for her lover. The utter amazement in her father's wide-opened eyes had almost crushed her to the earth as he had answered her rash demand.

"Do you forget your position in society as *my* daughter, Constance?" he had said. "Are you lost to all sense of propriety to proffer such a request to me?"

After that, baronets and their ladies, eldest sons and second sons' wives were duly meted out to each other in order, and the ruck of the nobodies were divided amongst each other as best could be arranged, and by some wonderful and delightful turn of fortune Eve discovered that Lord Harlowe was elaborately introducing her to somebody, who stood bowing to her and smiling down upon her with dark-fringed, steel-grey eyes and handsome clear-cut features, a somebody who whispered gladly in her ear as she rose to take his proffered arm.

“Did ever such a piece of luck happen to anybody before—as that I should be told off to take *you* into dinner?”

Eve enjoyed her dinner heartily and thoroughly, and with no *arrière pensée* whatever.

Dick had a great many *arrière pensées*, yet, nevertheless, he, too, enjoyed his dinner in an altogether guilty and surreptitious fashion. The sources of his enjoyment were twofold; in the first place he experienced a dangerous delight in the society of his companion, and, in the second, he was absolutely invisible to Constance Harlowe, as his place at dinner was on the same side of the table. He could feast his eyes upon Eve's loveliness, smile into her bright eyes, follow every turn of her white neck, every expression of her curled red lips, entirely free from apprehension that his absorption might be remarked by the lady to whom, in Lord Harlowe's phraseology, he was presumably “paying his addresses.” Occasionally, it is true, he glanced apprehensively towards his host and hostess, but the great

people at either end of the table engrossed so much of their attention, that they had no time to notice Dick's delinquencies. Eve was absolutely happy, her only apprehensions were concerning the behaviour of little Tom, who was far away from her on the further side of the table. A huge mass of flowers and palms obstructed, in some measure, her full view of her brother, but by dint of dodging and ducking her head she could just see his ruddy pate, nodding and gesticulating merrily to his neighbour.

"Who are you trying to see, Miss Latimer?" inquired Dick once of her.

"Little Tom—I am so afraid," lowering her voice, "that he will get uproarious."

"He is laughing a good deal."

"Oh, he always laughs—they all do, you know. Who is the lady he is talking to?"

"Miss Vincent; she is rather a cheery, strong-minded old spinster, with lots to say for herself. Master Tom seems to find her amusing."

“If only he doesn’t play any practical jokes upon her.”

“He can’t very well do that at dinner time.”

“N—no, but if Miss Vincent is unlucky enough to slip her foot out of her shoe, Tom is morally certain to kick it away.”

And Tom did. When the ladies rose from the table, Eve got hot all over at the sight of poor Miss Vincent stretching and reaching herself out under the table in a vain endeavour to recover her scattered property, whilst Tom stood by, with a beautiful unconcern in his placid countenance, finishing off his last remarks upon the superiority of single snaffles over double bridles to the wife of Lord Harlowe’s hunting tenant who had sat on his other hand; the footman and butler had indeed both to come to Miss Vincent’s rescue before she was able to join in the procession of the departing ladies, and then Tom appeared to awake with a wild start, and followed her to the door with profuse apologies for not having sooner perceived her embarrassing predicament.

"I have been told that ladies do kick them off when they are very playful," Eve heard him whisper to Miss Vincent as she passed him. "Why didn't you tell me! I'd have been at your feet—your pretty little feet, literally, ages ago!"

"Shut up, you wretch!" muttered Eve, as she passed him, between her teeth. A smothered but fiendish chuckle was little Tom's only rejoinder, as he closed the door upon his sister.

But all this was as nothing—a mere child's play to the catastrophe that followed later.

The drawing-room at Cambray communicated at its further end with another smaller room usually called the boudoir, and when Lord Harlowe came into the long room in the wake of the returning gentlemen, his eyes fell upon his lovely young guest, and his thoughts simultaneously flew to the boudoir.

"It will be only proper that I should pay some attention to the young lady who is dining for the first time in my house," said his lordship to himself, and made straight-

way for Eve with a directness that did credit to his taste.

“Miss Latimer, I have in the next room some very valuable old prints, collected by my great-grandfather, which it will give me great pleasure to show to you if you will honour me by looking at them.”

Eve groaned in spirit but smiled in the flesh, and promptly accepted the arm which her courteous old host held out to her, and accompanied him into the boudoir.

The portfolio of old prints lay upon the table; they were a curious, and certainly a valuable collection, chiefly of Dutch origin and of Dutch pictures. Lord Harlowe took them out one after the other, held each to the light, expounded their beauties, explained their subjects, tapping them with his gold-rimmed spectacles, and finding a great deal to say upon a topic in which he was really interested, all the time with a delightful conviction that he was making himself very agreeable indeed to a pretty girl who was his guest.

Poor Eve, who knew as much about old

prints as she did about quadratic equations, did her very best to appear interested and pleased, and certainly succeeded in making a good listener ; she was beginning, however, to think that the exhibition was never coming to an end.

“This, you will perceive, Miss Latimer,” continued the old man well up in his hobby, “is another landscape after Van Huttner ; this is considered a particularly fine one. Observe the softness of those hills in the background, and the peculiarly transparent depth of this mass of foliage ; the figures of the villagers, too, in the foreground, are particularly graceful and well-placed. Do me the kindness, my dear young lady, to notice this dancing maiden ; observe how unstudied is the pose, how easy the backward bend of the neck, how naturally the flowing drapery disposes itself, how charmingly the—the—the—good gracious, what on earth can that be ?”

A pause of paralyzing horror.

“Somebody—seems—to—be playing some-

thing," stammers Eve with a faint and sickly smile.

A terrible sound becomes audible from the long drawing-room, terrible in its small and shrill intensity. Eve's heart stands still with a horrible cold numbness.

"Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, twang a rang a tang, tumty tum, tinkle ting!"

Does not Eve know it well—too well—all too well?

Lord Harlowe, with a brow as black as thunder, stalks to the door. Eve follows, trembling in every limb.

A strange and fearful scene bursts upon their eyes as they fly thus unceremoniously back into the long drawing-room one after the other.

A circle of silent auditors, Lady Harlowe hovering, partly anxious, partly amused, in the background, and on a low chair, in the very centre of the room, little Tom and his banjo—

"There's a heart in this bosom I've lately been told,
By a blushing young maiden just forty years old.
She's a half Irish blonde, and she likes pork and beans,
Her feet are a feature, she wears seventeens.

Her front name is Hannah, her father's a tanner,
But him she does hammer, in artistic manner.
She sings 'Star spangled banner,' and 'Farewell Alanna.'
With a toothbrush I fan her, when she thumps the pianner."

sings little Tom in his quavering tenor voice.

And then everybody, Dalrymples, Castletons, Honourables, old Miss Vincent, and all the nobodies take up the chorus and shout vociferously together :

"Her front name is Hannah,
Her father's a tanner, &c., &c., &c."

"Such a scene has never been witnessed at Cambray Castle within the memory of man!" gasps Lord Harlowe below his breath.

"Bravo, bravo!" shout the guests, boisterously; "give us another verse, Mr. Latimer."

And then little Tom sings the next verse, which is, if possible, even more vulgar than its predecessor, with a great many cleverly given comic renderings and illustrations which elicit ringing peals of laughter from the delighted audience, such as assuredly that dignified roof has never re-echoed before.

So that was what was hidden under the

seat of the fly—Tom's banjo! Alas! why did not her instinct warn her of it?

Eve glances tremblingly at her host's countenance; it is black as any thunder cloud, and her heart sinks within her at the awful sight.

She looks across the crowd of Lord Harlowe's guests, and catches Dick's eyes bubbling over with intense and delighted fun. Constance is beside him, and she, too, is smiling quite brightly and merrily. Old Lady Montgomery is tapping her fan jauntily into her hand, everybody is laughing and talking, and little Tom keeps his place on the square stool in the centre.

Too, too well does Eve know that when once little Tom is wound up there is no stopping him. Oh! why had she not taken his suggestion as to ordering the fly at half-past nine! Somebody is pressing him to sing again. Little Tom, nothing loth, tunes up his instrument, smiles sheepishly, and breaks forth into another ditty entitled:

"Patrick, mind the baby."

Lord Harlowe resigns himself to the inevit-

able and sits down gloomily in a distant corner, crosses his arms, and rivets his eyes upon the carpet. Another and yet another song follow, and then it is time for the party to break up.

"Such a pleasant evening, dear Lord Harlowe," she hears the guests murmur gushingly to their host as they bid him good night; "really quite a treat to listen to that too delightfully clever young Mr. Latimer; so irresistibly comic and funny, I really don't know when I have laughed so much."

But when it comes to little Tom's turn to wish his lordship good-bye, Eve trembles and shivers as she hears Lord Harlowe say with a fearful solemnity of face, and with a cold and ceremonious distinctness of voice :

"Lady Harlowe and myself are deeply indebted to you, Mr. Thomas Latimer, for your most edifying musical entertainment."

To which little Tom replies quite airily and unconsciously :

"Oh, pray don't mention it. I was only too delighted to enliven them all up a bit ; so glad you liked it, Lord Harlowe."

“Never, never, never, in all your life,” cried Eve, as they jogged away together in the darkness of the fly, “never, as long as you live, will you be asked to shoot the Cambray coverts.”

And he never was.

END OF VOL. I.

PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO., GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, W.C. ;
AND MIDDLE MILL, KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

